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1.0 The European Conservation Action Network (EUCAN)

Working for a government organisation I am particularly used to acronyms, but I especially like this one-'EUCAN'. The European Conservation Action Network (EUCAN) was set up with the aim to establish exchanges of conservation volunteers between the UK and other countries of the European Union to carry out practical conservation management tasks in winter and survey work in summer. As a selected participant, on an exchange to the Czech Republic, this summer, I can personally testify that it demonstrated what a group of 13 volunteers (+ 2 leaders) who work together in a team could achieve when set with a practical conservation task. The acronym of 'EUCAN' as pronounced rang true.

1.1 Nigel Spring

The brainchild of the network has been partly sought by Nigel Spring, who in 2007 through his involvement with the Kingcombe Trust, and the Dorset branch of Butterfly Conservation took partnership with the Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO) in France and the Aggtelek National Park in Hungary and together they were awarded a Leonardo da Vinci Lifelong Learning Grant.

1.2 Leonardo da Vinci

This funding programme was established by the European Commission to build a skilled workforce through European partnerships with the objective of improving the provision of Vocational Education and Training across Europe. The initial funding grant received was based on visits for UK conservation volunteers to work in France and Hungary between 2007 and 2009. The network was boosted this year with additional funding between 2008 and 2010 to extend the programme of projects into Poland and the Czech Republic.

1.3 EUCAN? Volunteers Needed!

Whilst it's sometimes hard to get a job these days without experience, this scheme is one of those rare occasions when it's not a requirement to have done previous conservation work. And unlike some voluntary experiences-this one is completely free! The target audience is also very flexible and the scheme invites people with a minimum age of 18 from either employed or unemployed backgrounds, on work-based training schemes, graduates, from college or university.

With more trips planned to France, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, Nigel Spring will need groups of 13 volunteers to participate in these planned visits between 2009-2010.

If you would like further information, about how you can get involved on one of these planned trips, please contact Nigel Spring.

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1.4 My EUCAN CALL!

I was at work, when an unexpected e-mail appeared in my mailbox, Nigel Spring had been rallying around his personal contacts in conservation organisations to hopefully capture some interest to join him on one of the 2008 trips. Thanks to Vicky Myers who is the volunteer coordinator for the Forestry Commission in the New Forest, this e-mail got filtered down to me.

I immediately printed off the application form, and took it home for further consideration. I would need to take 13 days of my annual leave allowance in August, (and shortly before a planned 4-week holiday to Australia), be away from my home and my partner, and the return date would be his Birthday. Should I go?

1.5 Kingcombe Preparation Weekend

I was able to justify it all, so I completed the form. I then anxiously waited for the confirmation that I had got a place on the August trip, and hoped that my earlier deliberations had not jeopardised the opportunity. The e-mail confirmation arrived in the format of an invite to The Kingcombe Centre in Toller Pollurcum, Dorset for a preparation weekend from 13th-15th June.

The Kingcombe Centre has established a high standard of residential accommodation facilities backed by a good catering team who provided high quality 3 course meals, homemade cakes and freshly cooked English breakfasts it was enough to makes anyone feel very welcome, and at home.

Our key host was Nigel Spring, who really does edify a man with a complete passion for nature conservation. The whole weekend was kept informal, but interestingly, there was a consistent drive for learning. Laying out moth traps on the first evening was not hindered by the most recent upsurge in fuel prices, and the group duly carried all the equipment across the Kingcombe fields to set up. The 'finds' the following morning engaged the least and most knowledgeable

alike, so it was an equal learning opportunity for everyone. Nigel and partner Kathy Henderson took us to Powerstock Common and Maiden Castle. Where we observed an amazing array of butterfly species, with our newly trained eyes. Gradually an awareness of plant species and fritillaries was starting to be gained.

The weekend also provided a setting for us to meet and talk with the other participants, who would be going on the trip. I found this useful, to get an idea of the characters I would be sharing time with. It was also interesting to find out about other people's backgrounds some nature conservation linked and others not. This in itself provided me with some interesting thoughts, about careers.

Nigel was able to provide some further information through a pictorial presentation of previous trips undertaken, that helped us imagine what ours could be like. Finally some pictures of Ždánice - the site in the Czech Republic, which 13 others and I would be working in for nine days seeing in August.

2.0 Ždánice Uncovered

This summer I took the opportunity to be part of a team of 13 people from the UK, who travelled across Europe to a small town called Ždánice in the south east corner of the Czech Republic. For the purpose of conservation (or saving butterfly paradise) as we told reporters from Czech TV. The film crew had ventured out to this remote South Moravian region to interview this rare team of UK and Czech volunteers in action. Yielding loppers, bowsaws, brushcutters and chainsaws we demonstrated how we were tackling the problems caused by the abundant growth of false Acacia *Robinia pseudo*, and other emergent scrub.

2.1 The Journey

The outward journey began on Wednesday 6th August. I arrived to Basingstoke train station at nine thirty in the morning. As I neared the exit gates of the station, I recognised the faces of my small welcoming committee from Kingcombe. I smiled in recognition that I was pleased to see them but realised that I was rather rusty with the names. I was grateful to detach my backpack and two tents with Nigel to load into his trailer.

The next three days would involve some intense mileage to reach the Czech Republic by Saturday. With the exception of the short ferry crossing from Dover to Calais the rest of the way was all by minibus! My thoughts were really for Nigel, who had the task of driving, when the only challenge for us passengers was trying to manipulate a comfortable position to sleep in.

By 7pm that evening we had located the correct campsite at Bernisarrt near Mons in Belgium, and folks were quick to set up camp. Nigel had ordered enough pizza to feed a small army, the delivery driver was rather happy with his consignment (I expect it had been his biggest order of the night). We then set about to consume it, and started to relax, as we sat around our camp, with authentic Belgium beer.



Thursday 7th

The following morning people packed up early and it was just as well because a mighty tempest had arrived and the rain fell, but we were dry, and off to our next overnight destination in Wertheim, South Central Germany. Whilst the route kept us on the autobahn, we enjoyed the high standard of toilets, and didn't begrudge paying 50 cents to see the toilet seat revolve!

Another good camping spot, within viewing distance of barrages gliding up the River Main, again we were followed by rains and overnight from inside the tent, I was kept awake by a loud thunderstorm.

Friday 8th

Our last night under canvas would be in Durnstein, just slightly west of Krems in Austria. Another stunning location, alongside the River Danube, pitching areas were at a premium, and we all had to squash closely together.

Saturday 9th

The quick evacuation of tents that morning was a sign that the camping novelty was wearing off and the prompt departure from the campsite demonstrated our eagerness to reach our final destination, of Žďánice. First stop was breakfast in Krems. We filled the seating at a corner coffee shop, the manager duly obliged to this group of 'non-regulars' and served up rounds of bread with fresh apricot jam, and quickly pushed us on our way.

By 12pm we had crossed the border of the Czech Republic at Breclav, and arrived in the Town Square of Kryov. Here our Czech hosts David Novotny, Entomologist, met us of the Ceske Bedejovice University and Zuzka Veverkova, Project Coordinator. After the formal line up of greetings we went for a very long lunch, the menu was long; the time given to order was long, so the wait for food was long. But the driving for Nigel and us passengers had been long so it was nice to sit in the comfort of Bar Atlantique, for the rest of the afternoon.



2.2 The Country

My first glimpses of the Czech republic were mildly disappointing, as we approached the border (no longer controlled), there were some desperate looking crops of Scot's pine and a sign advertising Tesco, supermarket- so much for seeing something unfamiliar I thought!

However the scenery soon improved and whilst the ex-communism era was still exposed in the format of grey buildings, lifeless towns and a small range of old Skoda cars, the journey soon filtered these out, until we could only see arable rolling landscapes, hills and nature. we'd arrived at Ždánice. Again it seemed a rather isolated place with small industries; some dis-used buildings overgrown with vegetation, some newly built with modern day features and others reminiscent of the communist style buildings.



My brain was now intrigued to see the premises we would be staying at, we all knew that it was the local football club, but in my mind all I could visualise was a big sports hall, in which we would be camping down on the floor each night. But to my complete surprise we had comfortable bunk beds in small rooms, complete with private balcony that looked out to a modern open-air swimming pool, used by town residents but free for us to use.



2.3 The Country & It's People

Our first evening, in Czech Republic got us ensconced into one of their major cultural festivals in a location called Milotice, at the 26th Narodopisny Festival, a traditional folk festival with music and dance, that included a group of Maori dancers from New Zealand- most bizarre! Being people that spoke our native tongue, we made conversation with them afterwards, as we'd been struggling with the language- even for the simplest of things like food and beer! Some of the boys managed better, thanks to David who educated them into the style of the local drink 'shots' as they fundamentally became called. The village contained a characteristic style of house, but these were not inhabited, but used purely for storing their wine, and I learnt more about the design when we visited an open-air folk museum in Strážnice, on our last day.

Marketta and Honzas were our sustainers. This couple really provided us with a true and authentic menu of Czech foods. Our appearances at their premises twice a day, lunch and supper, kept them busy. The food would be freshly transported in their family car to the 'pub' and it was quickly distributed to each table. At first eating three courses in the middle of the day was unfamiliar to some of us, but we soon built up appetites to match it. Whilst we rewarded ourselves to the local pint of Pivo at supper, the most refreshing drink, came in the format of something reminiscent of 'Panda Pops' bright artificial colours of fizzy drinks, but it did quench our thirst, and provided us with an energy boost.



Town Mr Miroslav Procházka

We were cordially invited to meet the mayor at the town hall, soon after our arrival on the 11th August; we all made an effort to look presentable, and rather nervously entered his office, at 10am that morning. Customarily we were each handed a small 'shot' glass to which we toasted ourselves to the forthcoming project-Nastrave!



The Czech Volunteers

Thanks to advertisements placed by Zuzka, on non governmental organisations (NGO) websites, friends of David Novotny at the Ceske University, the project attracted volunteers to work alongside us. Eva from Prague, George from Brno, János Tóth, a second entomologist arrived from Debrecan University in Hungary, and Jane. It was great to have this additional interaction, (they all spoke good English) so we could exchange our working cultures and lifestyles.



2.4 The Ecological Problem/Local History

The work site was known locally as 'Ve Srankach', and from Czech translation this means 'In the Fences'. The total size of the site is 18 hectares (4 football pitches). This area was the size of the former communal pastures. Historically these would have been pastured and grazed with goats, sheep, or livestock, but these practices have declined locally, and as a result this area had become heavily thicketed with vegetation, with few management inputs.



2.5 The Work

The working day pattern was pretty civilised, buffet style breakfast from seven thirty in the morning at the football club bar. We would attempt to all be ready an hour later, so we could head off to the work site, which was a short distance by minibus across the town. I had opted to be a hand cutter, so my preparation was minimal providing I had my hand gloves, a bow saw and loppers I was ready to go. It took a bit of time to identify, where and what to remove, but gradually the techniques and methodologies developed.

Kathy and Nigel gave opportunities to alternate on tasks, which helped to break up the monotony, and I really enjoyed 'dragging' the brush for a co-worker, making the area clear for them to brush cut without obstacles. The physical layout of the site was challenging, being one side of a valley, it contained sloping sides of varying degrees, and this could either help or hinder, depending on whether you were dragging up or down.



We'd take breaks as a group, mid morning and afternoon, supplemented by sweet cakes and the coolest water that someone had taken the effort to fetch from the natural spring. The re-hydration was complimented with sitting in the cool shade of the *Robenia*. The weather was humid, and working on a south facing valley, kept us well exposed to the sun's rays, and whilst I produced plenty of sweat, in a bizarre way it actually felt healthy. Most days we would down tools, and request the brushcutters and chainsaw operators to silence theirs by 5pm. There was one exception when deep thunder rolled in so we got rained off site, which made a timely transition for us into the weekend. After a days toil in the fields, it would be the morning procedure but in reverse. We'd file our sweated bodies, aching and overheated feet onto the minibus anxious to be back at base to refresh, and cool off- and the swimming pool was the perfect companion for doing that!

2.6 The Task

David and Zuzka took us to the valley in Žďánice, which was to be our work site on Sunday after arriving in Czech. Soon enough, we were observing the local nature. Thanks to David's agile ability to gracefully swoosh his butterfly net even more amazing was his handling expertise, which enabled the group to clearly see the markings, as he held specimens between his fingers. Memories of Kingcombe were coming back to me, and whilst my fritillary knowledge was still rather sketchy, I was with a bunch of experts, so I was going to learn something!



It was clearly apparent that the area was home to an abundant flora and fauna, and so it was quite obvious now that the clearance of the overgrown valley vegetation would only help to further enhance and permit the fritillaries to extend their habitats. During our visit thirty-four species of butterfly were recorded (see species list). Our practical nature conservation task was very important work and the hope of David and other entomologists of the Ceske University that it will sustain and strengthen these species and others to this site.

2.7 The Results

By the end of our first weeks' work, visible signs could be seen, with walls of brash emerging, and areas that had been densely overgrown, were again starting to see the light 'Tobys Tunnel'.



Our last day on site really felt like the coming together, having started at one end of the valley strip, we had made it across, and all the teams had now converged together, to end up in the same completion zone. Looking around us it was hard to remember how it had looked, the top track was now accessible, to the extent that it was now possible to drive a tractor and trailer along it. The locals had been quick to discover a free source of firewood!

The removal of the Acacia on this top bank, whilst operationally demanding for the chainsaw operators, provided great light, and views above it. The brash whilst still in situ, and starting to die off, showed the volume removed. Its complete disposal would be the task for a chipping machine, after our departure. Our time had run out and I think most of us were ready to stop.



We left feeling satisfied that we'd made an impact and carried out a tidy job. But it's true that nature won't stop and even the area we cleared, nature will continue to re-colonise. Another team will need to re-visit the site next year and continue where we left off. I'm hoping that this report may have convinced you that conservation work is really great fun, so if you think you'd like an opportunity like this then please get in touch with Nigel Spring.

2.8 The Team

A team recruited from a variety of backgrounds, the dynamics of the group worked really together, and it was a major player in why this trip became such an enjoyable task. Everyone worked exceptionally hard, and there was a real drive between each of the teams, brushcutters, chainsaw operators and handcutters to get on with it, and deal with the thorns, that would so often entangle us. The dynamics of the team also grew socially, and it was great that Nigel and Kathy plus the local people engaged us with their cultural festivals, Histopedal, Folk festivals and our last unforgettable night, being entertained by the Town Mayor, with musicians and dancing all held in the wine cellar. I think this sealed for the locals the appreciation they had for us coming to work in their country, and also it made me feel quite privileged to have been involved with all of these people in such a special trip.



3.0 Personal Reflections

3.1 What I learnt

- ❑ Some phrases of Czech, but that's mostly thanks to Marty, for his constant reminders, and use of his phrase book.
- ❑ That it's good to have fun, and not be serious all the time and break habits and routines of doing things, to be more flexible with people.
- ❑ That I could be enthusiastic enough on a Sunday morning to get up early for bird watching, observing birds close up through powerful binocular lenses was completely amazing!
- ❑ That Entomologists are very clever, identifying the taxonomic groups, Latin names and then being able to translate and explain things about the species to us in English terminology. Well Done János & David
- ❑ I started to gain a familiarity with plant species, from just constant observations.
- ❑ Thanks to the library of books put on display at the football club accommodation, by Nigel & Kathy, I was free to dip into things and had time to read and learn.
- ❑ To like dumpling bread, miss it terribly now back in the UK!
- ❑ Carrying out practical conservation work is rewarding,
- ❑ Physical work outside this was a real contrast compared to my administrative office job (except I am working very close to nature, in the New Forest)!
- ❑ My walks in the natural environment are more interactive now, as I've become more observant, I recognise plants, I can spot butterflies and generally take a lot more interest in wildlife.



3.2 Future for me and Conservation

Having been engaged in practical conservation work, the last requirement of EUCAN as well as submitting this report, is that you would hopefully become involved in regular volunteering in a nature conservation capacity. The scheme requests that you offer to work for 2 days with an organisation, of your choice. I was interested in the work of the National Trust, who has small pockets of land, which they manage, around the New Forest. I will be attending a working party of the South Hampshire Volunteer group on Sunday 16th November, in Hale Purlieu, for one day. I am also interested to work with Milford Environment

Group, who started carrying out small-scale conservation works in the village of Milford on Sea where I grew up back in the early 1990's.
I will of course like to maintain my contact with Kingcombe and Nigel Spring, and where possible support the work of the Centre as an environmental education learning facilitator.

4.0 An Ode to Ždánice

Acacia is its name; *Robinia* removal is the game,
Handcutters happily lopped and bowsawed,
Careless to the injuries they scored.

The chainsaws echoed around,
And the brushcutters kept their blades close to the ground.
We kept up the pace,
Even with the hot sun shining down on our face

The evenings were our reprieve, so
We spent our Czech Crowns with ease
The beers went down a breeze.

We were supported by such a wonderful team,
Zuzka, David and Jane, helped keep us sane,
We'd made great friends but now it was the end
We'd all like to come back again.....
Bring back, bring back, oh bring back the Czech Republic to me, to Me..

By Grace Ford