

European Conservation Action Network Visit to Aggtelek National Park, N.E. Hungary September 2008

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The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Centre, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo de Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk
or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559: email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk)

Our party of 13 volunteers, consisting of 8 women and 5 men, varying in age from 22-64 and from a wide range of backgrounds, met for the start of our 'adventure' on the evening of **Sunday 31st August** at St. Pancras Youth Hostel, Marylebone Road, London. Our leaders, Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson were due to meet us at Keleti Station, Budapest some 36 hours later.

I had previously met two members of the group (Helen Shaw and Sara Field) during an Introductory Weekend held at The Kingcombe Centre in June: Helen had indeed drawn the short straw in that she had been asked by Nigel to organise/lead/chaperone the group during our journey from London to Budapest. A task that, in the event, she accomplished without fluster.

Monday 1st / Tuesday 2nd September

7am on Monday saw us gathering in the wonderful new Eurostar Terminal at the refurbished St. Pancras station for the start of our journey.

Highlights of the Journey Out:-

- Being whisked in great comfort from London to Brussels, in 2 hours! Talk about a shrinking planet!



Visiting the Grand Square in Brussels in bright sunshine – followed by lunch 'en plein air'.

Seeing Cologne/Köln Cathedral at close quarters inside and out – an especial treat, given its iconic survival from allied bombing in 1944/5.



- The ICE train journey from Köln to München! – not just the speed (max. 290 km/hr) but style as well.



The tour of Buda Castle in bright, warm sunshine with our host Sandor Boldogh. Sandor is the Conservation Officer for Aggtelek Nemzeti Park whose friendly, animated enthusiasm was immediately evident.



Evening meal in the almost Alpine surroundings of Tengerszem Restaurant, Jósvalő.



Szalamandra House

Arrival at Szalamandra House, Szögliget at 10.30pm? – with its more than comfortable hostel-style accommodation. This photograph was obviously not taken at 10.30pm! During the Soviet era, these buildings formed a border post between Hungary and the then Czechoslovakia.



Wednesday 3rd September

At breakfast, we were introduced to Eszter, her daughter Dia and son Istfan; all three of whom were to prove so much a part of our enjoyable domestic arrangements.

This was our day of introduction to the three locations of our scrub clearance work:- 1. alongside the track leading up to Acskó, 2. Acskó; in the hills above Szalamandra House and 3. a lovely little valley of predominately arable farmland at Csarabos just south of Aggtetek. The maximum temperature during the day reached 27°C – rather challenging, especially given the nature of the work to come and the awful summer at home.

The landscapes of Szalamandra, Jósvalfő and Aggtetek are one of Europe's famed Karst regions ie. old, bedded and reef limestones, which give rise to classic landforms of limestone cliffs or scars, pavements, dry gorges, underground drainage and cave systems. (England, of course, has large areas of such geology, topography and associated ecosystems in The Pennines and Mendip Hills)

It is this geological inheritance which has under-pinned the designation of this part of N.E. Hungary as a National Park – with its cave systems having World Heritage Site Status.

Highlights of the Day:-



The overall character of the environment as seen above, with its rolling forested hills, small abandoned pastures, rich bio-diversity and low human impacts.



Clouds of silver washed fritillary butterflies (on thistles). I get excited at home when I see one individual!



Coming across a gang of woodsmen extracting hornbeam and beech (for firewood) – using horses to tush the stems. Horse extraction in these circumstances makes sense given the steep slopes, need for high manoeuvrability, sensitivity of site, relatively greater cost (in Hungary) of mechanised methods, and the local availability of skilled horse-loggers.



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Spotting and photographing the preying mantis or *Mantis religiosa*.

- The beginnings of an understanding of the fascinating symbiosis between the Scarce Large Blue butterfly (*Maculinea telejus*) and the Great Burnet (or *Sanguisorba major*) and ants.



Seeing the herd of Hungarian White cattle grazing under the watchful eye of a herdsman and dog. These cattle have been provided by the Fertő Nemzeti Park in an attempt to assist in re-claiming abandoned hill pastures in Aggtelek National Park.

- The evening talk at Szalamandra House given by Sandor Boldogh, on the work of the Nemzeti Park; with its themes of low staffing levels, co-operation with Slovakia, the retreat of hill farming, abandonment of ecologically rich sites, rural depopulation generally and the question of how much we value the conservation of rare/threatened species? Sandor's themes, of course, apply to upland/hill/marginal areas throughout the Western World and are exercising the minds, bodies and souls of concerned individuals/bodies world wide. Hence a large part of the *raison d'être* of our visit to Aggtelek.

Thursday 4th September

A clear, very warm morning and our first work day: clearing scrub from two, inter-connected, wonderful former hill pastures in the hills above Szalamandra (Acskó). It was wonderful to experience just how much clearance work could be achieved in one day by our group of fifteen plus 30 or so students from Gödöllő University – all under the supervision of Imre Mihalik, a ranger for Aggtelek National Park.

Imre – Park ranger



Szádvár Castle



Juniper left uncut



Had this clearance work, from the encroaching Blackthorn scrub and Hornbeam woodland, not taken place, these pastures and their rich ecological value would have disappeared within a few more years.

That evening, back at Szalamandra House, we were each invited to share with the group some comments relating to our personal, family, working backgrounds; to our motivations/ambitions for this trip and to our futures. (We had begun to gel as a group back at St. Pancras Youth Hostel – by now there was a healthy group atmosphere developing).

Friday 5th September

Our second work day saw temperatures rising to the low 30's celsius – not easy for we English! and saw us beginning to clear Hornbeam, Blackthorn, willow scrub from the track and side valley bottom leading up to yesterday's work location at Acskó – again under Imre's 'guidance'. Here we were directed to burn all the brash rather than drag it off into woodland margins. My role was as 'fire stoker and watcher'. I needed the extra heat like a blow on the head!



Looking up valley as work got underway



Looking down valley following 1½ days clearance

Highlights of the Day:-

- A pre-breakfast walk with Kathy up through mature beech/hornbeam woodland to the ruined Szádvár Castle. Not enough time to do it justice, so promised myself another visit.



Spotting a tree frog (*Hyla arborea*) – an amazing lime green.



Spotting a sand lizard (*Lacerta agilis*)

- Wild basil – spotted and photographed.



Former charcoal-making terrace.