

European Conservation Action Network
EuCAN 2009
Leonardo da Vinci: Aggtelek Hungary

Trip Report: J. Sayers

The aim of our programme through the Leonardo da Vinci Awards part of the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme was to work with European Conservation partners to carry out practical management and to attract local people to join them as volunteers.

The programme is hoped to lead to a future exchange of ideas, expertise and resources and participants gain a better understanding of nature conservation on a European scale and training in the use of hand tools and power tools.

The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, 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 da 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).

Placement organisation

Nigel Spring was our UK contact, the leader and project co-ordinator on behalf of the Kingcombe Centre. Sandor Boldogh was the main contact in Aggteleki, Hungary - working for the ANP and Istvan Komosczki a park ranger acting as translator, we also had talks from the local Mayor of Szogliget Katalin Mihalik and Josef the Mayor of Komjati who owns a beef herd. Adam Szabo, gave us a talk and day visit on large carnivores of the area. The second location we visited Fertő-Hanság Nemzeti Park, tasks were led by Andras Ambrus the NP ecologist and we also had talks from Krisztina Mészáros from the National Park education centre at Fertőülak.

My personal objectives for involvement

Working for a Community Forestry Project, my role is largely desk based, bringing in funding and managing projects,, training, advisory and developing strategy to engage communities within the Forest. With a small proportion of practical work with community groups, schools and corporate social responsibility days I felt the placement would allow me to gain more skills and experience an insight into how it feels to be at the 'sharp end of volunteering' as I provide support for many volunteers myself.

I have been a volunteer previously including over the past 12 months I have undertaken for orchard surveying work for PTES (People's Trust for Endangered Species). This placement was interesting in providing the opportunity to learn about new habitats not within our Forest area, better understand the approach to conservation taken by our European partners. Finally, I wanted to understand cultural differences to volunteering in Europe.

A work and training weekend was organised at Kingcombe Centre, to brief potential participants about the type of work to expect in Hungary, meet fellow participants and to provide some idea of the itinerary of the trip itself and equipment needed. At this preparation weekend in January, I received training in Brushcutter use, safety and maintenance of

equipment. I was able to put this training into practice during the weekend working on 2 sites near Kingcombe Centre in Dorset.

The Hungarian Placement

Hungary is a landlocked country situated at the heart of Europe, with its tallest peak reaching just over 1000m - the foothills of a much larger Carpathian range. The country is traversed by 2 major rivers –the Tisza in the east and the Danube in the west. Hungary has a great abundance of lakes including the great Lakes of Balaton and Fertő which make it a favoured place of migrating birds.

One fifth of the country is covered by forest, mainly in the north, and a great treeless plain of southern Hungary which covers half of the land area contains the largest areas of grassland in Hungary. Mountain ranges, the Mátra, Bükk and Zemplén cover a wide area of the north.

Our trip's main areas of focus were;

Aggteleki Nemzeti Park

Aggteleki Nemzeti Park established in 1985, is situated in northern Hungary at the Slovak border and is a World Heritage site important for its Karst Landscape. We spent the majority of our trip within the Aggteleki area. It straddles the border with Slovakia connected to it by the Slovak Karst National Park. The cave system in Aggteleki is vast and has over 200 caves, the largest being Baradla Cave extending 25km into Slovakia. The park landscape is largely deciduous forest of predominantly oak and beech, with a small number of grassland clearings scattered throughout. Rocky outcrops of limestone provide the perfect habitat for rare plants and insects and especially rare butterflies, as well 220 species of bird.

Bükk National Park

We visited Bükk National Park for a day as part of our cultural visits. Bükk National Park, meaning 'Beech' in Hungarian, is a mountainous region north of Budapest on Hungary's Border, it was designated as a National Park in 1977 and extends from the town of Eger to the city of Miskolc. Renowned for its cave and beech woodlands, it is an Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) and is a major tourist venue famed for its trails, climbing areas and caves. The area we visited was between Miskolc and Garadna via Lillafüred & Hamor on the narrow gauge railway following the meandering Szalajka stream.

Fertő-Hanság Nemzeti Park

Fertő-Hanság Nemzeti Park was based in one of the most guarded areas of the former Iron curtain, extending across the Austrian border, Lake Fertő is a protected nature reserve and a World Heritage site (2001).

The lake which is shallow and less than 1m deep and has a vast expanse of reeds covering over 5km. The lakes water supply is from only 2 small streams and rainfall and as a result the lake has dried up on a number of occasions, the last in 1867-71.

The lake waters now controlled to prevent flooding to surrounding settlements once fluctuated regularly, but now levels are more controlled, leading to anaerobic conditions which kill off the roots of the reeds, further having a knock on effect on the wildlife including the red herons.

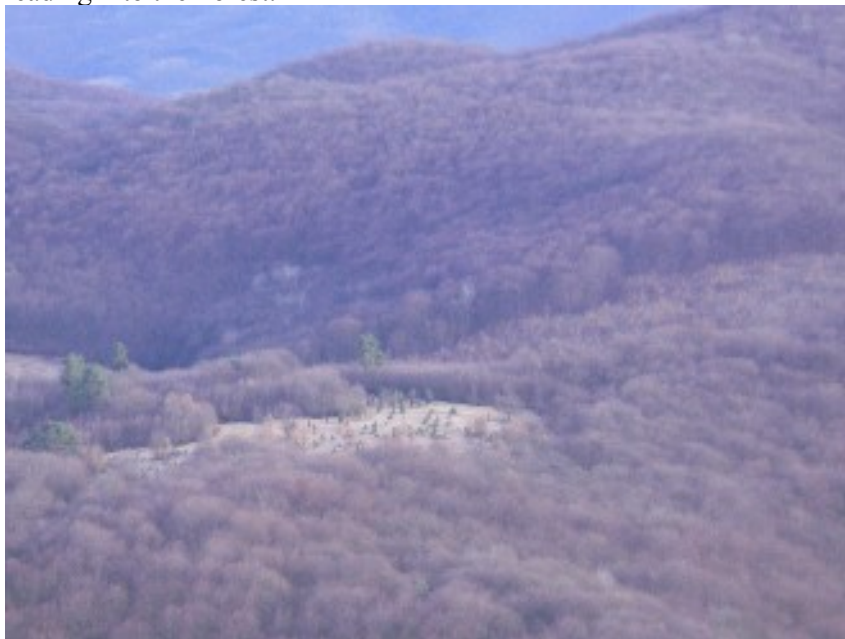
It is interesting for its 200 species of birds, including the Hungarian Ibis, Spoonbill and Little Egret and its Snowflake flowers. Its visitor access is controlled in a number of areas with visits to be made through the parks administrative office at Sarrod. It has a number of walking trails, a cycle path which circles the lake and swimmers attracted to its warm shallow waters. We spent 2 days here on our homeward journey including 1 task day.

Task days

On the trip we undertook a total of 5.5 practical task days, 2 at Acsko, 2.5 at Tornakapolna and 1 at Hideség, Fertő Hanság. A group of Hungarian students joined us and helped with orchard clearance.

The practical conservation workdays – were mainly woodland scrub clearance, with the aim to restore open habitat for the special butterfly populations which are found in the Aggteleki National Park.

We worked on 2 sites, one near to our Szalamandra Guesthouse, called the fields of Acsko, where encroaching scrub had greatly reduced the habitat to dense Blackthorn. At the Acsko site, we removed scrub using brush cutters, chainsaws and other hand tools. The group worked together cutting, clearing and stacking brush with support from Rangers from the Aggteleki National Park, this clearance was intended to restore a wide corridor of open land leading into the Forest.



Acsko – the ‘runway’ we cleared

The second site was located at Tornakapolna was an old Palinka plum orchard - which is of cultural and ecological importance - for traditional management methods and forest products (plums to make Palinka spirit fermented in local village stills) and secondly for the butterfly invertebrate and bird habitats it provides. The task involved clearing and cutting dogwood and blackthorn from around the plum trees, clearing regenerated scrub and burning the cleared material on site. A number of us also helped to cut up logs for the impressive biomass boiler at our guest house, I took the opportunity to gain further practice using a chainsaw.

The practical work was an enjoyable contrast to the cultural days, although due to weather conditions – snow on one day, we not able to finish our objectives. National park staff were not always seeming keen to capitalise on our willing labour, this was disappointment when our objective for the trip was to link areas of open ground which could have been achieved with a another days volunteering. There seemed to be reluctance from some Park staff to join in and help, with certain individuals disappearing for a considerable time during the task days. Our group questioned why ANP staff did not undertake practical work as part of their existing work themselves, especially in winter when there were few visitors for cave trips –little but often could have made a huge difference to maintenance of these habitats.

At Fertő-Hanság Nemzeti Park we undertook one day's task here whilst travelling back home. Hideség was one of András' butterfly sites, here we thinned trees at the wetland edge, clearing and stacking the debris of felled trees for subsequent burning (to provide corridors between the butterfly habitats), we then helped to dam a drainage channel to raise the water level in the reed bed to improve the habitat and to make the adjoining lake more suitable for fish. We heard the management did not understand why we wanted to volunteer at all, why would we want to work hard if we weren't getting paid from such a distance -there seems little hard work ethic and volunteering simply doesn't seem to have reached the management ethos never mind the people themselves. The group discussed whether volunteering is a luxury in the UK, not afforded by a low paid, subsistence economy in Hungary, maybe it is a measure of increased leisure time and a substitute for a loss in interaction of the wider family network - the people seem still to have here.

Cultural days

We visited a number of locations, including the village of Josvafo, Caves at Rákóczi and Vörös-tő Cave near Jósvalfő. Sandor spoke about the tourism, the cave system attracts with a huge tourist influx during the summer months particularly in July/August. These tourists are mainly day visitors and the opportunity to attract over night stays is limited with infrastructure being poor. There seems little incentive to increase tourist revenue since any income generated by the Park is ploughed back into national government; investment from private individuals is risky and not always possible in an area of high unemployment and low wages.

The national park is zoned for visitor use from Area 'A' which are research areas and no tourists are encouraged' to zone 'D' where it is open access.

Conservation and Local People

Whilst the ANP proposes increasing designation to protect the special wildlife, EU subsidies push against this. An example of this is the development of old buildings at the detriment to the bats, as roof spaces become renovated enclosed and inaccessible as roosts. There is some opposition from residents that conservation is all very well but doesn't support local population pressures and economic needs, government fines and regulation create a culture of 'the stick' rather than creating incentives to protect - 'the carrot' approach.

EU agricultural subsidies encourages the burning of land – in order to easily manage land and gain subsidies - land burnt appears as 'managed' visually from satellite remote sensing. Burning as a management technique is an easy option to manage the ever encroaching scrub, however at the expense of nesting birds and grassland invertebrates which may have overwintered as eggs in these areas.



Burning 'management'

Free time

On our afternoon off we choose to explore and take a bike ride from the Hostel across the forest, the biking was hard – deeply rutted tracks with sticky mud clogging the wheels making it impossible to even push the bike without removing the wheels (4 times), still the solitude was bliss, and we saw deer cross the trail ahead.

The forest seemed to stretch forever until we reached a clearing which seemed to have been ploughed – shortly afterwards, we biked onto Derenk the abandoned Polish town. The town now has been largely cleared but was once a settlement of 500+ deep in the northern forest, residents were resettled in the 1960's in the towns across the area and the buildings dismantled and moved with them. Only the school building and a ramshackle village dwelling remains, but it was wonderful to read the stories of the people who once lived, farmed and hunted there on the walls of the former school.

We cycled on to the Slovak border on a much easier path, down the steep forest roads across the border we disturbed 4 roe deer which shot across our path. Over the pass, the landscape gradually opened out to a huge flat bottomed valley and the brightly painted industry of Slovakia. A visit to a dodgy looking bar in Jablonov and a rapid cycle back to the forest pass before dark. It was a long climb back up, and we freewheeled silently back to base being rewarded by a glimpse for me and a good sighting for Mark of a lynx in a clearing 100m in the distance, we arrived back at the guesthouse in the dark.

Wildlife

Aggteleki is an ecologically interesting area due to its position between the high Carpathians to the north and the steppe to the south, this allows cross over of habitats leading to a wide variety of biodiversity. Aggteleki is a Karst environment 500 species 40 of which are endemic to this area. Wildlife present includes rare birds, which survive well here despite a large boar population which feed on their eggs.

Lynx, bears and wolves are found in the high mountains, rare blue slugs, 20 species of bats some of which live in the vast cave system and rare wildflowers including the Lady's Slipper Orchid.

Throughout the trip we learned of its special wildlife, and saw a few of its special inhabitants such as horseshoe bats in the caves. The distinctive black and yellow salamanders were comical stumbling across the paths near the Tengersiz Restaurant. We saw live wild boar (captive) in the village of Szelcepuszta and their signs commonly across the woodland areas, a badger sett and droppings and learned of their interactions with wolves.

We could only imagine the variety of the butterflies which are present later in the warmer months, which treat this area as their home, unfortunately a moth trapping evening at Fertő-Hanság NP was too cold and we only saw 3 types. The forests were wonderful even in their winter coats and vast by UK standards were similar to our own forests.

The highlight of the trip for me was the wolves (Farkas), Adam Szabo came to speak to us, he is the parks expert in large mammals and had previously been funded through an EU 'LIFE' Project.

Adam showed us a video of the monitoring of the wolves which are at the southern boundary of their territory in the Carpathians, although the population is denser in Slovakia, Ukraine Romania and Poland. Aggteleki Park is a good indicator in the health of wolf populations since it would be here they would first disappear.

Wolves are now protected species in Hungary; unfortunately, they are hard to monitor and are still threatened by hunters and snares. Trophy hunting of such species whilst illegal in Hungary is lucrative in cash terms and permitted further into Eastern Europe. The EU project has helped to track and monitor the extent and size of packs in the area along with developing an education and awareness raising programme, unfortunately funding is becoming harder to find. Amongst rural populations, wolves are still perceived as undesirable inhabitants and fear of them remains, despite there have been no recorded human attacks by healthy animals in Europe for decades.



Dog or wolf prints? (Dog unfortunately...)

On one day, we went up into the Forest towards the Slovak border to look for wolves, Adam showed us a deer kill and explained the technique the wolves use to hunt, deer are not able to hear the approach of predators close to running water and therefore it is a good area to track the wolves. We found wolf droppings in numerous places along the trail including some which were only a few days old, of which a sample was taken and a GPS location – this was an encouraging sign to show they were still recently in the area. Wolf sightings are rare and easier to find during the snows, we would have been unlikely to experience a sighting with such a large group.

Landscape

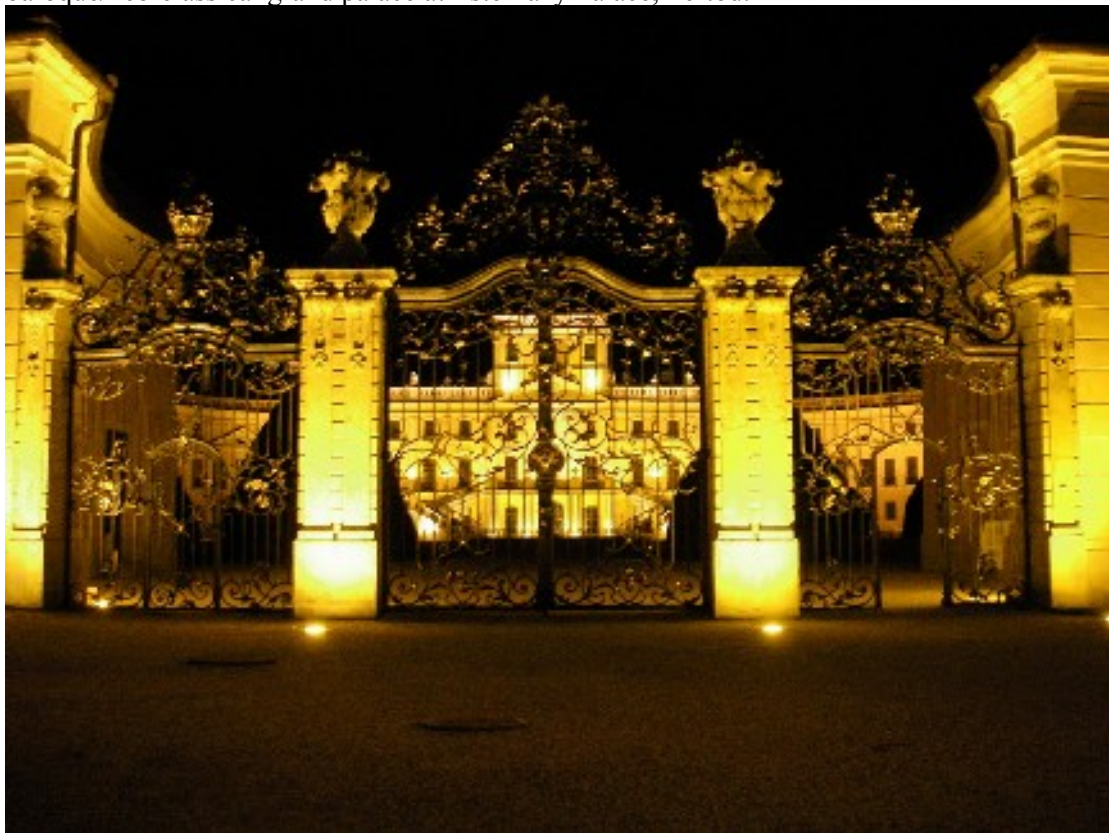
The karst landscape in this area is characterised by rolling hills with occasional karren fields exposing the outcropping limestone – we saw an example of this near to the castle at Szádvár above Salamandra Guesthouse. Dolines are common throughout the area - A doline, sink or sinkhole is a closed depression draining underground in karst areas, they can be cylindrical, conical, bowl- or dish-shaped. The diameter of dolines range from a few to many hundreds of metres, providing culverts for disappearing water courses into the cave system – 3 streams alone re-emerge at Josvafo.

During our stay, we visited 2 caves Rákóczi Cave a deep cleft broken into when quarrying in the adjacent iron ore mines, the Rákóczi Cave located above the Bódva Valley is stunning with a huge variety of formations including soda straws, crusts, flagstones, cave corals and the rare helictites and an underground lake. Later in the trip we visited a small section of the Baradla Cave system, very different in character, the main passage being a former streambed, with rooms widening to 7-8 m high and over 6km in length. The access is very good and there are a good variety of flowstones, draperies and columns, there is even a concert hall which has excellent acoustics.

The land, is largely owned by the state Forestry company (60% of all land in Aggteleki), as the land is managed for timber rather than conservation it creates tensions with the National Park, it would have been interested to hear their perspective and management approach to gain full understanding however. Remaining land within the park includes grassland, arable, abandoned land, garden, orchards and vineyards.

Grazing land is conspicuously rare as compared with previously farmed land a few decades ago in the communist era, this in turn is leading to an increasing loss of grassland now becoming scrub forest of juniper, dogwood and blackthorn – and orchard becoming scrub choked and loss of valuable habitats for butterflies and birds associated with these, this restoration of land became the focus of much of our conservation task days, but it hard to imagine any true impact made by our team when this habitat encroachment is accelerating vastly beyond our effort.

Architecture - The architecture of Hungary was interesting and of great contrasts with the baroque/neo-classical grand palace at Esterházy Palace, Fertőd.



The National Park Centre mixed contemporary design with traditional construction, and it's thatched wings (although not functional in terms of heating efficiencies), were a contrast to the often bland utilitarian (1950-1990) government and city apartment buildings from the communist era in Budapest and Miskolc. The cultural days had us visiting historic churches of Martonyi and Tornaszentandrás and traditional rural housing such as that seen in Szogliget with their one storey 'longhouses' of rendered clay bricks, plasterwork and long gallery often intricately carved and to Gömörszőlös to the museum of Lázló Kovacs. A highlight of the trip was a walk up to the castle above Szalamandra hostel, Szádvár , a fantastic viewpoint across to the Carpathians north, across to the towns of the Ukraine and vantage point of our task area Acsko nicknamed 'the runway'.

Summary of my learning experience

It was good to have 3 weeks to go into good depth of the issues. The work placement gave me new skills in practical techniques which I can use in helping to manage sites as part of my existing and in future work, I was pleased to receive a brush cutter certificate for the Lantra course following the training weekend in January 09.

I was disappointed however in that my employer did not recognise this placement as relevant experience to bring to my existing employment, nor that it was pitched at a high enough level to enable me to take time, or cover equipment costs, instead I choose to participate as part of my leave allowance.

Kingcombe Centre is an Environmental Education Centre working very close with the Butterfly Conservation Group to educate about butterflies and help to manage habitats within the area with volunteers, whilst my knowledge of butterflies on the trip has not significantly increased due to the time of year we participated I have gained more interest in identifying species as a whole.

The trip has encouraged me to be more observant in terms of biodiversity in my work and private recreation -I have visited sites in the UK since which I would not have considered prior to the trip. The insight into wildlife on the trip has given me a greater perspective in my work.

The people who came on the trip were good companions and taught me about their own areas of expertise in particular, thanks go to Graham and Peter, our bat and bird experts, I would like to hope I will keep in contact with some of the people on the trip.

If I would change anything, I would have liked increased opportunities to speak to our Hungarian hosts about our own management processes, jobs and lives back in the UK, why we volunteer and how organisations working with communities/volunteers and the benefits and opportunities of doing so - it was a little one way. I would have been interested on this particular trip to meet 'the forestry' organisation; this left out a large perspective on how the forest is managed and why and may help to understand conflicts between them and the National Park.

The travel to the site via train encourages me to consider other options to flying, although I have already reduced my impact in this way by reducing travel by flying. I was also encouraged to see the basic technology employed in the biomass boiler used for hot water and to heat the hostel, utilising a local resource whilst being lower impact on the environment.

It is hard to imagine any rapid changes in the culture of northern Hungary in terms of commercialism and a new tourist economy, while this might generate more future income for land management given more flexibility by central Government to keep revenue local, it may well bring detrimental effects alongside, and a lack of this is what keeps it special.

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