

**EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK
AND LEONARDO DA VINCI EUROPEAN TRAINING PLACEMENT
TO HUNGARY - AGGTELEK AND FERTO-HANSAG NATIONAL PARKS
MARCH 3rd – 20th 2009**

REPORT BY M FURNISS



Clearing scrub to re-establish a traditional orchard near Tornakapolna in the Aggtelek National Park, Hungary

**PLACEMENT SENDING ORGANISATION: KINGCOME TRUST
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION CENTRE
IN CONJUNCTION WITH BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION (DORSET
BRANCH) AND TRIP CO-ORDINATOR NIGEL SPRING**

INTRODUCTION

I first heard about the European Conservation Action Network (EuCan) and the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme in December 2008. My partner Jo read a request for interested parties on an environmental website. She suggested that we apply for a placement to undertake several weeks voluntary conservation work as part of the scheme. I learnt that the Leonardo transnational fund for vocational training operated in 31 European countries, encompassing a whole variety of projects. These projects involved partnerships of organizations in different European countries with an emphasis being placed on improving skills, learning, co-operation and partnerships. In our case the English host seemed to be a combination of the Kingcombe Trust Environmental Education and Conservation Centre in Dorset, Butterfly Conservation (Dorset Branch) and trip organisers and leaders Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson. The European partnership was with the Aggtelek and the Fertő-Hanság National Parks in Hungary, both classed as UNESCO World Heritage sites.

After a preliminary training weekend at the Kingcombe centre, it became clear that the emphasis of the practical conservation work in Hungary would be habitat improvement to benefit butterfly populations. Personally, knowing little about butterflies and even less about Hungary, I saw an opportunity to improve my knowledge of both. I had worked as a full-time conservation volunteer in the late 1980's for the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, but since then following other lines of work, my contribution to voluntary work had become neglected. I therefore regarded a placement on the EuCan scheme to be a good way to motivate myself back into the ethos of conservation volunteering. As I was eligible for the trip criteria, I could get time off work and the majority of the trip expenses were kindly met by the Leonardo fund, I decided to take part.

REPORT

There were 14 English participants on the trip and for most of us the journey to Hungary was both relaxing and visually stimulating. We travelled by train from London through the channel tunnel and via France, Belgium, Germany and Austria. The journey was probably less relaxing for our group leader Nigel, who drove a minibus towing a trailer of equipment across Europe. On arrival at Aggtelek National Park (ANP) in the Carpathian region of northern Hungary, we were made welcome at the Szalamandra hostel in Szogliget. This was a peaceful location for our base for the next 12 days. After leaving the ANP we travelled to south-western Hungary to the Fertő-Hanság National Park where we stayed for a further 2 days. Following this we drove to Vienna to catch the return train to London.

In total the trip was 18 days and consisted of a packed agenda of practical work, cultural and educational visits. There was also time for socialising, exchanging ideas, stories and experiences with both English tripmates and Hungarian locals. Time was also set aside to allow exploration of the national parks and to observe their flora and fauna.

Workdays at the first worksite on the hillside above Szogliget consisted of clearance of dense blackthorn, wild rose, hornbeam and juniper scrub and regeneration. Our aim was to maintain and increase open spaces in the woodland and to make connections between clearings. The clearings provide a more suitable habitat for the growth of wild flowers which then attract butterflies, for example the Cross Gentian which is the food plant of the larvae of the Mountain Alcon Blue.

At another worksite near Tornakapolna in the ANP, we worked to clear an overgrown orchard of its dense scrub, particularly dogwood. Here the purpose was the re-establishment of a traditional landscape in which fruit trees had an important role. The plums are used in local village distilleries to produce the spirit Palinka, important to local culture.

Our group was joined and guided at the worksites by ecologists and rangers working for the ANP, including our main host and ecologist Sandor Boldogh, head ranger Imre, ranger and cave guide Istvan Komosczki, and entomologist Janos Toth. A group of 5 Hungarian students from Debrecen university also joined us for a few days.

Workdays were interspersed with cultural and educational days. On these we visited: the medieval castle of Szadavar; the Tornaszentandras church; the Martonyi monastery; the 'eco' village of Gomorszolos which had both a large private collection of old buildings and artefacts and an official ethnographic museum; old iron ore workings and a working trout farm at Lillafured in the Bukka National Park; a working cattle farm and herd of Hungarian grey cattle; a stables with Hungarian Hucal horses and the Rakoczi and Baradla limestone cave systems.

One day we were led on a hike through the forest in search of evidence of the resident wolves, by local expert Adam Szabo. He also gave a talk on the wolves, lynx and bears present in Hungary. Other talks were given by ANP ecologist Sandor Boldogh on the history, geography, geology, flora, fauna, land ownership, ways of life and conflicts within the National Park. Biologist and lepidopterist Attila Huber talked on the invertebrate fauna of semi-dry grasslands in the Aggtelek karst. The mayor of Szogliget, Katalin Mihalik, explained the village, its community, lifestyle and politics. We also had a Hungarian language lesson from Fanni Boldogh to help us cope and make an effort with local communication.

In the Fertő-Hanság National Park, we had a talk by ecologist Andras Ambrus, explaining the historical reasons for the existence of the park and its current importance as a wetland reserve. Under the supervision of Andras, we cleared an area of scrub between two adjoining reed beds, thereby permitting open passage from one habitat area to another for butterflies such as the Large Blue. We also built a small dam in a dyke in order to slow down the drainage of an area of reed bed in summer. At the National Park Education Centre for Schools, we were given a talk by Krisztina Meszaros on the role of the centre in educating Hungarian children in conservation.

CONCLUSION

This trip has made me think about my future employment and commitment to voluntary conservation work. It has opened my eyes to the feasibility of long-distance travel by train as a more environmentally friendly alternative to flying. It has given me an insight into Hungarian culture, attitudes and conservation work. All positive aspects which I have gained from the experience.

One negative aspect arising from conversations and observations from the trip, was the impression I got of a general indifference toward voluntary conservation work in Hungary and the amount of needy work that is consequently neglected. I did however feel there are reasons for optimism for progressive change in the future. The Hungarians we met who are employed in conservation work seem to be dedicated and capable professionals. I would like to think their insight will lead to the encouragement, establishment and support of a network of local conservation volunteer groups.

I would hope that our small and seemingly insignificant trip has had some positive benefits other than to ourselves. I feel our practical work achieved minor inroads for butterfly conservation and cultural preservation. Where our contribution could be more significant is in the example we set of being willing volunteers for the benefit of nature. If we had any influence in encouraging Hungarians to consider the prospect of volunteering for much-needed conservation work, then I would regard our trip as being a complete success.