

Zdanice - August / September 2009
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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, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk). The trip I joined was to Zdanice in the Czech republic.

So where does my story begin? I think most properly with how I came to join 12 other intrepid souls to journey by train across Europe to undertake conservation work in a remote corner of the Czech republic (albeit less than an hour's drive from Vienna)

I am not a conservationist, a lepidopterist, an ecologist, a botanist, a generalist (that's a new one on me) or even something as pedestrian as a biologist - although I did once aspire to this last. I am however something of a lifelong volunteer and I have always loved being outdoors and being in the countryside. Also from an early age I have enjoyed physical work and over a number of years have tried my hand at conservation tasks in order to combine the two – physical activity in the great outdoors. It certainly beats going to the gym – far more enjoyable and useful! And of course in these days of environmental uncertainty and when natural products and methods of living are so rare; or perhaps just harking back to watching Tom and Barbara having a crack at self sufficiency I do have an interest in; well self sufficiency. Thus I tend to want to know whether you can eat it, weave it, build with it or burn it?

So I have taken part in a number of conservation days & holidays and on one of these I discovered the Leonardo Project and Eucan. Besides the countryside I also have a number of other interests including travelling and experiencing different cultures. As I child I visited most of western Europe and as an adult I've made a number of trips to eastern Europe but still enjoy expanding my horizons, hence the appeal of the Czech republic. Also as a teenager I travelled across Russia, Poland, Germany and Belgium by train so the trip to Zdanice did not seem overly long although I couldn't but reflect that I could fly to Australia in the same time as this journey took. But thus one way and another I came to join the aforementioned intrepid journeyers.

So what did we do and what are my reflections on the trip? Well our task was to clear an area of hillside of what I was told was Acacia and an area of grassland that was being taken over by Ash trees. I was assigned to the Acacia and fortunately had a good pair of gloves as before the trip I was warned about the very thorny Robinia that we would encounter. For several days I waited to meet the dreaded Robinia uncertain what this would hold given a combination of the warnings and the fearful spikes on the Acacia – which had not even been mentioned! It was not until into the second week that I discovered that the two are one and the same!

But I have to say that what we achieved was very satisfying. We cleared almost a whole wood to link together two valleys, complementing the work begun the previous year. We began by dumping the cuttings deep in the woods where we were told they could be left to rot, but several times we had to move the accumulated waste as we progressed so far that deep in the woods became on the edge of the woods and then well behind where we were now working.

And what are my reflections. Well there was our chainsaw contingent. There was Richard in his Gay Pride leggings trying to pull over a 30-foot tree with a fifteen-foot rope. Then there was Nigel telling Brian that axes were defunct before getting his chainsaw stuck and needing to be rescued by Brian's axe. And finally there was Abby and the time we stuck a dagger in the ground at the precise point where we thought a 60 foot tree would fall – I lay some claim to fame as I judged the need for an extra three feet when placing the dagger; but I cannot take any credit for felling the tree such that the tip landed dead on the dagger. But we already knew that girls are best!

Then of course there were the butterflies. I have fond memories of walking through wildflower meadows as a child; one in Bavaria in particular is an abiding reminiscence, the beauty of which was enhanced by a host of butterflies flitting from one flower to another – hugely evocative. But my parents told me that one must never touch a butterfly as its wings are delicate and to damage them could be fatal to the butterfly. Hence I was somewhat taken aback by all the catching and handling of these delicate animals. I was assured that it doesn't harm them, even that they like it! But one or two that we caught looked quite shabby and their wings were ragged and I couldn't help but wonder if, thanks to our capture of them, this would be the fate of those who so far looked to be in pristine condition. I don't doubt that those wiser than me may in the long term be able to do good by better knowing and understanding the world's butterfly population. But for me catching them or being able to tell a fritillary from a blue or a white will never surpass the ambience of that Bavarian meadow

As for other highlights I certainly appreciated the Czech practice of planting fruit trees by the road to provide shade and sustenance. Also the hospitality of our Czech hosts which included an evening in the Mayor's wine cellar. And otherwise the highlights centre mainly on the camp and the campfire that we set up to mind some goats lent to us by the hotel – a strange story indeed. But here we ate what has to have been the best food of the trip. What can beat sitting by a campfire, cooking supper in the embers or on freshly whittled skewers or waking up and looking out down the valley on a misty morning! Those are more memories to add to the collection.