

# An analysis of whether participation in the European Conservation Action Network project constitutes a Busman's holiday

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## Summary

The European Conservation Action Network project sends groups from the UK to work with partners across Europe. The project aims to promote the exchange of ideas, expertise and resources. Being offered the opportunity to partake, presented an ideal opportunity to investigate whether participation in the project can be considered a busman's holiday.

A programme of extensive ecological and cultural study was undertaken, focused around the town of Ždánice in the Czech Republic. In addition to practical work removing scrub encroaching on an important unimproved grassland site, participants were given the opportunity to experience Moravian culture, and to learn more about the history of this unassuming but proud country.

The trip was a hugely valuable and enjoyable experience, and while there are certainly similarities with my day job, I learnt things that I would never have learned behind a desk in England.

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## Introduction

*Busman's holiday: leisure time spent doing something similar to one's usual work*

The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) is an exciting project set up in 2007. With funding from the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Project, EuCAN has been sending groups from the UK to work with partners from conservation organisations in five European countries.

Groups work alongside local experts and volunteers, carrying out practical management tasks and species monitoring. In addition a range of trips and activities provide opportunities to learn about the history and culture of the host country. The ultimate aim of the project is to promote a productive exchange of ideas, expertise and resources, that will instil participants with an enhanced understanding of nature conservation on a European scale<sup>2</sup>.

Having worked in the field of environmental conservation for five years, I was thrilled to be offered the opportunity to take part in the EuCAN project. Following acceptance on the programme I attended a preparation weekend at the Kingcombe Centre, Dorset in January, before

enduring the long wait for departure. In the final few weeks preceding the trip, my excitement began to bubble over and I found it hard to resist the urge to tell all and sundry I would soon be off on my European adventure.

I found myself met with a consistently recurring response - *sounds like a busman's holiday to me*. Perplexed by this unanimous conclusion, I decided to undertake an analysis of whether spending 19 days in the Czech Republic working on a grassland restoration project with other enthusiasts, really was a busman's holiday.



Plate 1: getting to grips with work in the Czech Republic

## Study area and methods

### Aim

The aim of the study was to collect data during a trip to the Czech Republic in order to establish whether taking part in the EuCAN project can be considered a busman's holiday. Pilot studies in a number of Czech towns and cities during 2001 and 2007 indicated the country held a certain appeal for the author.

In total, 12 participants departed London on Thursday 19 August, in a journey that over the course of 24 hours, four trains, one minibus and over 1200 km would take them through three countries en-route to the Czech Republic.

### Study Area

The study was carried out in the South Moravia region of the Czech Republic, focused on the town of Ždánice and an area known locally as butterfly valley.

Butterfly valley, owned by Ždánice Town Council contains some of the last remaining unimproved grasslands in the area, making it important for the conservation of a number of uncommon species. The warm climate, varied geology and topography make the valley, as the name suggests, particularly good for butterflies.



Plate 2: views in to Ždánice from the second valley

### Field Methodology

A standardised working day was established for participants in the field. This included ample opportunities for tea and cakes, which based on previous experience, were proven to motivate workers even during prolonged periods of rain.



Plate 3: the tired workers rest and recuperate

A comprehensive programme of scrub removal was undertaken with the majority of target species preferentially selected for being well-furnished with spines and thorns (Table 1).

Table 1: Description of key target species

Species	Description <sup>3</sup>
Hawthorn <i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	very thorny deciduous shrub or tree
Blackthorn <i>Prunus spinosa</i>	spiny rigid shrub
False Acacia <i>Robinia pseudoacacia</i>	tree...thorny
Bramble <i>Rubus fruticosus</i> agg.	a scrambling shrub bearing hooked spines

Studies undertaken included measurement of European Hornet *Vespa crabro* attraction to moth traps and there was a lesson on identifying the call of the Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*.

### Cultural Analysis

Another major objective of the study was to gather vital information about local culture.



Plate 4: traditional blessing the vines celebrations

Alongside working in butterfly valley, integration with locals was achieved through attendance at festivals, trips to nearby towns and regular study visits to the local bar.

### Food Analysis

Considerable food analysis was undertaken by the group. When received, meals were inspected, photographed and discussed extensively by participants in order to establish provenance prior to consumption. These tests were generally favoured as more reliable methods for identification than attempts to interpret the menu; however results were on occasion inconclusive.



Plate 5: an example of Czech cuisine

## Results

### Ecological Training

Despite often less-favourable weather conditions (rain), 34 butterfly species were recorded during the trip. A number of other species were seen, and particularly exciting was the opportunity to encounter species not found in England, including European Suslik *Spermophilus citellus*, Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* and Green Toad *Bufo viridis*



Plate 6: Weaver's Fritillary *Boloria dia* - not found in England

Additional species were recorded, which although present in England, are usually encountered only with a lot of persistence and a little luck. This included Sand Lizard *Lacerta agilis* and High Brown Fritillary *Argynnis adippe*



Plate 7: Field Cricket *Gryllus campestris* nymph - endangered in the UK

### Cultural Analysis

As promised, numerous cultural activities were built into the programme, including visiting the annual Ždánický Histopedál festival, watching a traditional play at Bučovice Castle, and attending a party in the mayor's wine cellar.



Plate 8: Ždánický Histopedál - bicycles, costume, and beer - the recipe for a good Czech festival

Trips to local museums revealed some traditional Czech pastimes such as women hand-painting eggs (*kraslice*) to give to men at Easter. We were reliably informed that this is not as common as it once was, as many women have become lazy (N. Polaskova pers. comm.) and instead now just give the men *pivo* (beer). No complaints were heard from Czech men on the demise of this tradition.



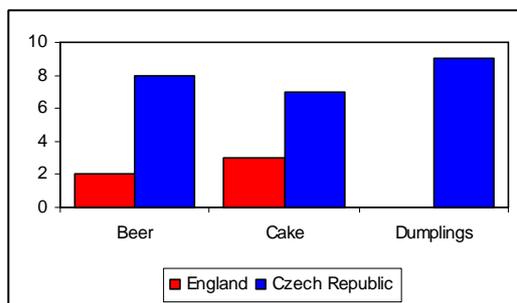
Plate 9: Bučovice Castle

Attempts at speaking the Czech language were made with equal amounts of enjoyment and frustration. Fortunately it was never required to order *čtyři sta, čtyřicet, čtyři* (444) of anything.

### Food Analysis

Consumption of several major food groups increased significantly during the trip (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Comparison of average weekly consumption



The culinary highlight was picking, cooking and eating wild mushrooms. I personally have a knack of locating inedible species but with a little help from my Czech friends I was soon tucking into an early supper, served of course, with dumplings.

On the subject of food, it was noted that I myself had become an important local food source, and despite many thwarted attempts I donated blood to one tick and at least 30 mosquitoes.

### Discussion

The aim of this investigation as set out in the introduction was to establish whether taking part in the EuCAN project can be considered a busman's holiday. Had I really chosen to spend

my leisure time doing something similar to what I do at work?

### Ecological Training

The programme did not disappoint in providing an amazing opportunity to learn about the ecology of the area and encounter numerous new species.

The time and expertise given by the project leaders and our Czech hosts was universally valued, and working alongside so many fellow enthusiasts enhanced the whole experience.

It is always valuable to see how problems are tackled in different countries and by different organisations, and many similarities can be drawn between conservation in England and the Czech Republic. Both the struggles and the aspirations felt very familiar.

Research undertaken in the valleys has provided information about how they are used by butterflies. Alongside the area owned by the Town Council, the valleys are split into multiple small ownerships, and the challenge now is to work with landowners to ensure that the local landscape can retain its importance for wildlife.

Biodiversity is ultimately lost or conserved at a local level. The EuCAN project illustrates the importance of learning from others in its drive to promote collaboration and sharing of knowledge throughout Europe. It also highlights the need to involve local communities and encourage them to take ownership of their natural environment, to ensure long-term support and success of projects such as the grassland restoration in butterfly valley.

### Cultural Analysis

Experiencing different cultures has always been of great personal enjoyment, and once again the Czech Republic did not disappoint.

The opportunity to learn about the history of the country, as well as experiencing its culture and the welcoming local community all contributed to an overall better understanding of the Czech Republic and its people.



Plate 10: the welcoming Czech attitude

### Food Analysis

Czech food is perfectly suited to ensuring recovery from a morning's hard work, and likewise the beer is equally appreciated for this purpose.

Wandering along a Czech lane, you will find plentiful fruits and nuts to replenish you, and bring your inner forager to life. One thing I won't miss however is the dumplings.

### Conclusion

Maybe it was a busman's holiday, but I have always found the work-life balance of an ecologist to be somewhat hazy.

My lacerated arms have healed, my mosquito bites receded and after several washes the bonfire smell is now out of my clothes.

My time in Ždánice, from beginning to end however will stay with me. Carrying out the work I love in another country was a hugely enjoyable and invaluable experience that I aim to repeat.

I extend my sincerest thanks to Nigel and Kathy for enabling me to take part in this trip.



Plate 11: until next time...

### References

1. Oxford University Press (2010) *Oxford English Dictionary*
2. EuCAN (2010) about us [online] available at: <http://www.eucan.org.uk/page/home>
3. Rose, F. (1981) *The Wild Flower Key*

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### Acknowledgements

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 (Registered Charity Number 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](http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk) or from Nigel Spring (telephone: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767/email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk)).