

Wild Europe Field Programme

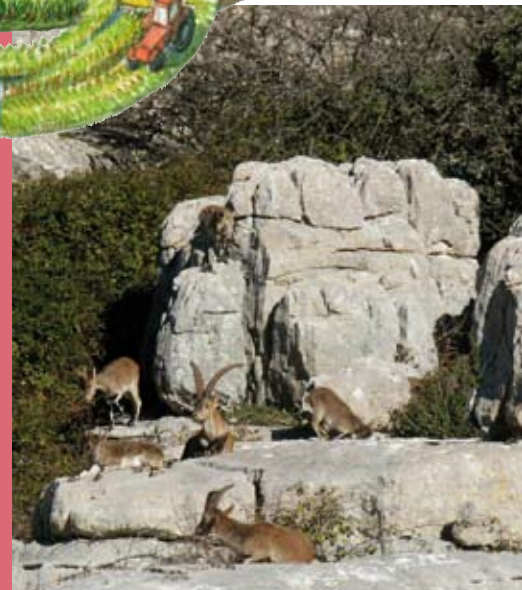
A Field Programme for creating European Wilderness



From unspoiled to untamed

Open broadleaved forests where deer and European bison are chased by wolf, bear and lynx; extensive grass steppes where the ground trembles under the hooves of thousands of wild horses and bovines; cliffs packed with ibexes, large colonies of vultures, eagles and eagle owls; deltas with large numbers of pelicans, sturgeons and sea turtles; marine reserves where 25 species of whales and dolphins provide first class entertainment – welcome in the European wilderness of the 21st century!

Today's generation can realise such a vision. A modern Europe without borders offers a nature without borders or limitations. An almost forgotten richness of flora and fauna, remarkable on the European continent, can be developed in a network of large wild areas. New generations of Europeans will enjoy this fortune. And, above all, in many European regions the development of spectacular wilderness will be the key to unlock new, sustainable economic prosperity.





A new European movement

As more and more Europeans leave rural areas for urban areas, large parts of these rural areas are currently being abandoned. However, rather than view this as neglect, another more positive vision can be realised: increasing numbers of people are looking for opportunities to escape their frenetic, hurried lives and are seeking to explore large natural areas for peace, quiet and adventure. The ongoing depopulation of entire regions creates a huge opportunity for large-scale natural areas. It offers unique chances for the current generation to start developing complete ecosystems on the foundation of new rural economies, where nature itself is the driving force. More and more governments, private companies and conservation organisations are becoming aware of this opportunity.

The European Parliament agreed on an important resolution for the development of European Wilderness in December 2008. As current host country for the Presidency of the EU, the Czech Republic has organised a Wilderness Conference in Prague in May 2009. The Wild Europe Initiative is a direct and pro-active response to this.

Four conservation organisations are jointly exploring possibilities to support these exciting developments. WWF, ARK, FREE Nature and Eurosite will investigate the possibilities to bring new ambitions for wilderness into practice within the next 10 years. We are looking for European partner organisations and for suitable areas to start implementation of an Action Programme to put these ideas into practice.

WILDERNESS IS MORE THAN FOREST ALONE

Many European nature conservation programmes focus on the conservation of forests as their first priority. In contrast with Africa and North America, the association of wilderness with forests has a historical basis in Europe. The majority of the European flora and fauna evolved in tandem with large herbivores and were able to find a place in extensive agricultural landscapes. However, since the 19th and 20th century, this is changing rapidly: because of intensifying agricultural practices on one hand and abandoning of large marginal agricultural areas (which will become forested spontaneously or by large afforestation programmes) on the other hand, these species are now at risk. For this reason, much of European biodiversity is now 'trapped'. When we look at the European Wilderness of the future, an important way to address this problem is to provide a role for herbivorous animals, which can create landscapes that contain all the ingredients and gradients between open, grassy habitats and closed forests that are sure long term carbon sinks.

A new, inspiring view on nature

Changing the strategy from traditional nature conservation towards a more development based approach also changes the framework of reference for European nature. This reference is no longer based in the past but in the future. In practice this means a change in focus, for example, from unspoiled closed virgin forests to a more complete ecosystem with a place for herbivorous processes, half-open landscapes, river dynamics and natural bushfires.

Species which survived in agricultural derivations of the ecosystem reclaim their place in a natural setting. One difference from a classic definition of wilderness, which withholds human interference and keeps that to a minimum, is to let human activities contribute to a spontaneous wilderness development – this involves a shift in thinking from unspoiled to untamed. Protection of our drink water supplies, flood management systems, sustainable harvesting of minerals and nature products, ecotourism – these are all modern needs, which can support the quality and development of large natural areas.





Tying up the powers

The success of this new approach depends on good collaboration between governments, commercial companies and nature organisations, where every nature organisation fulfils well-fitted tasks. There is growing interest in such an approach in Brussels: the lobby and policy-making bodies especially have to work on the implementation of concrete measures and financial means/ streams to enable its realisation.

Local nature organisations have to continue working to seize the opportunities presented by recent developments in rural areas: but they are restricted, unable to enlarge their ambitions to a European dimension, because of the scale of the areas involved, limited finances and means of communication.

The biggest challenge currently is to link new and promising European policy developments with real local opportunities: there is a need to ensure that knowledge and means are targeted appropriately and that initiatives with a high chance of success are able to develop on a European scale. Provision of essential broker services to achieve this lies at the heart of the initiative put forward by WWF, ARK, FREE and Eurosite. This coalition provides a well-balanced source of international networking expertise, various means of communication and the practical guidance required to implement projects to create European Wilderness.

Communication

In terms of European Wilderness, most Europeans have a limited concept having been raised with existing agricultural systems or wide-spread but closed forests. Communication will therefore play a key role in the entire program. We will have to outline a new vision to achieve a changed perspective of the future and depict that as accurately and precisely as possible. This will include demonstrating through a growing number of project examples that man and nature can co-exist and be sustainable. In future and over time, people will be able to replace their current notions of nature by referring to growing numbers of real places, which provide more and more images of real European Wilderness. Communicating ecological and economic successes will yield a 'domino' effect, based on a growing network of European Wilderness areas. Spectacular animal species are the ambassadors and they tell a story to European youth, which will stimulate and encourage the formation of a new generation of European nature conservationists.



THE EUROPEAN BIG FIVE

'The Big Five' is a well known expression in Africa: species such as the elephant, rhino and lion have become ambassadors for the conservation and regeneration of African wilderness. Yet, European fauna also has its own top species! Large predators such as the brown bear, wolf and lynx, herbivores such as the European bison, moose and wild horse, and scavengers such as the imperial eagle and black vulture are present, not to forget the Blue whale and the Killer whale in the marine world, nor the wild boar as the northern hyena. It will be difficult to choose just five in a European 'Big Five' list!



TOWARDS A DIGITAL LANDSCAPE?

European Agricultural policy is accelerating fragmentation of the European landscape. On good fertile soils, the land use will become more intensive and, at the same time, marginal agricultural lands will be rapidly abandoned. Within a few decades, 30 to 60 million hectares of land will lose its extensive agricultural usage and will be covered with forests, with or without a helping hand. This can already be seen in many places such as the French Jura, Istria, most mountainous areas and the Baltic states. Especially for these marginal lands, the development of natural wildernesses offers a full grown economic, social and ecological alternative.

If we don't act now whole areas will be abandoned within a few decades; half open areas will become vast forests which will prevent migration of floral and animal climate refugees and because of that different species will come to the brink of extinction!

60,000,000 hectares



THE RHODOPES, AN EXAMPLE

Local organisations in the Bulgarian Rhodopes are asking for urgent help. Farmers are giving up farming with their herds and are moving away to cities or to better agricultural areas. One of the richest habitats in Europe is becoming overgrown with scrub and forest: for example, different species of raptors are becoming extinct because their food (lizards, snakes and turtles) is becoming scarce as a consequence of the decline in short vegetation areas.

The Rhodopes are a good example of a part of Europe with great wilderness potential and opportunities.

In the area, there are several designated Natura 2000 sites. Linking these sites would give the opportunity to create an area of tens of thousands of hectares within just a few years. The natural process of grazing can be sustained with the reintroduction of wild cattle and horses, European bison and other extinct species.

After a few years, there could be additional opportunities to connect the area to sites on the other side of the borders, so that an area of more than 100,000 hectares would become a reality.

After ten years the project should be self-sustaining and self-functioning. This would mean that it has a huge working wilderness network, with all indigenous large herbivores and carnivores. Eco tourism would continue to develop, products from nature could be sold nationally and internationally, and the exodus from the rural area could be realistically stopped or even reversed. People would have the chance to believe in a new future for their land.

We have already assisted the project with applications for subsidies, with raising local, national and international public awareness and with practical support on working with introducing wild animals. We have also helped to bring together different stakeholders on all sides of the borders and to begin building up a regional economy based on wilderness.

PHOTOS Leo Linnartz/ARK, Daniel Petrescu, W.J. Strietman, Twan Teunissen/ARK, Rollin Verlinde/Vildaphoto, L. Zuydgeest
DRAWING Jeroen Helmer/ARK

Our goal: 10 European wilderness areas in 2020!

Excellent project examples must illustrate the proper ambitions of the Wilderness programme in the short term. One has to distinguish between the areas, which will be promoted to a European Wilderness area and the location for the proposed pilot projects. In the latter, natural processes will be initiated, lost species re-introduced and new economic partnerships tested. The pilot projects might start with areas of several hundreds or thousands of hectares: eventually, these will form part of much larger networks of at least 100,000 ha, acting as the basis for this enlargement. By 2020, we aim to realise ten European Wildernesses, which reflect all large European ecosystems. This means that within 10 years, in 10 areas, wildernesses of at least 100,000 ha will be created and they will contain the majority of European flora and fauna.

Former border areas are often regions where a large part of European nature was able to persist and exist: at present, such areas offer the best chances for creating wildernesses again. Focussing on these areas will also stimulate collaboration between EU member states for one coherent network.

THEREFORE, GOOD EXAMPLES OF EUROPEAN WILDERNESS AREAS HAVE TO:

- consist of at least 100,000 hectares each, often in a cross-bordering setting;
- be susceptible to the restoration of complete ecosystems of the specific region, including reintroduction of lost species;
- be economically viable and competitive compared with current land uses;
- be or become embedded in social fabric of their region;
- strive to upscale the ecological, social and economic achievements of other comparable regions;
- be willing to share their experiences with other project examples within the network of European Wildernesses.

What is it we have to offer?

WWF, ARK, FREE Nature and Eurosite are exploring ways to facilitate and support the development of Wilderness areas in Europe. Local organisations will have the lead and full ownership, so that a bottom-up approach is ensured. We will seek collaboration with other (European) organisations, which support our vision and approach and can play a role in making this vision a reality. This is what we have to offer:

- Help to develop a Wilderness Project in areas that have successfully applied for this status;
- Support in writing concrete project proposals and fundraising;
- Limited use of own resources in the initial phase of new projects;
- Practical support on ecological, economic and social development;
- Facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experiences through our networks;
- Communication about the projects to the general public and key stakeholders.

Organisations, institutions or individuals, which are interested to work with us and can provide areas where the wilderness concept as described in this brochure could be developed, are welcome to contact us – please download the nomination form from our websites.

Does this idea of wilderness appeal to your organisation?

If the idea appeals to you then nominate your potential example-area on one of our websites. You just fill in some basic data and we will contact you.



www.wnf.nl



www.ark.eu



www.freenature.eu



www.eurosite.org