Romania has a reputation as the poor man of Europe. Wrongly – because when it comes to natural heritage, the country is among the wealthiest of all. With natural riches ranging from the vast reed beds of the Danube delta to the wilderness areas of the Carpathian Mountains, Romania has every right to shake off its poor reputation.

Treasure trove of biodiversity

A large part of the country is taken up by the Carpathian Mountains, which arch across much of Central and Eastern Europe before settling in Romania. The rugged mountains are one of Europe’s last bastions for wild animals. With two-thirds of the Carpathians within its territory, Romania is home to Europe’s largest population of large carnivores, including half of the continent’s bears, and over a third of its populations of wolves and lynx. The Romanian Carpathians are also home to the largest areas of virgin forests on the European continent.

Most of the Danube Delta, Europe’s largest delta and wetland area, also lies in Romania. Before flowing into the Black Sea, the Danube spreads over a surface area of about 580,000 ha, creating a wetland home for a staggering range and abundance of plants and animals, and an important stop-over point for migratory birds. Such features have earned the area designation as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve as well as priority status in WWF’s „Global 200“, a list of the two hundred most important areas for biodiversity in the world.

Romania’s territory also includes a long section of the Black Sea coast (228 km) and associated sand dune and coastal habitats, including biological features that are entirely new to the European Union.

Europe’s Canada

The bounty of Romania’s wilderness and natural resources have earned the country the nickname as the „Canada of Europe“. Some 47 % of the country’s area is in a natural or semi-natural state. The diversity of life forms in Romania is enhanced by the fact that the country is a meeting point between different kinds of habitats and species, including ones from the north (boreal), Mediterranean, continental Europe, Pannonia, and Caucasus. The result is a high number of species, including many that are endemic to the country.

Some 5.4 % of Romanian territory has some form of nature protection. One of the jewels among the protected areas is Retet National Park in the Carpathian Mountains, an area that long served as a royal hunting ground before receiving formal protection as the country’s first national park in 1935. Unfortunately, Retet is one of the few of Romania’s protected areas that enjoys effective protection on the ground and not just on paper.

Area: 237,500 km² (about the size of the United Kingdom).
Terrain: Mountains (31 %), hills and plateaus (33 %), plains (36 %). The Romanian Carpathians, with their three branches (Oriental, Southern and Occidental Carpathians) separate the country into three main areas: Central Transylvanian Plateau, Moldavia and the Walachian Plain, Danube river and various tributaries. Black Sea coast in east.
Elevation extremes: lowest point: Black Sea 0 m; highest point: Moldoveanu mountain peak ~ 2,544 m.
Protected areas: Total of 845 protected areas, including 9 national parks, 6 nature parks, as well as 3 UNESCO-designated biosphere reserves (Danube Delta, Retet, and Pietrosul Rodnei). All together, ca. 5.4 % of the country’s territory.
Capital: Bukarest – population 2,066,723
As elsewhere in Europe, agriculture has had a decisive impact in shaping the Romanian landscape. In contrast to other parts of the continent, however, the persistence of traditional forms of agriculture, including extensive grazing of sheep and cattle as well as cultivation that does not rely on chemical inputs and heavy machinery, has preserved much of the landscape in its earlier form and health. Besides producing food, such areas are still able to provide a home for a rich variety of habitats and species, and can provide an ecological stability that is important for example for flood and water management.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the connection between Romanians and the land has increased in recent years. Many people who have been thrown out of work as a result of industrial restructuring after 1989 have moved back to the land – in 1999, agriculture accounted for some 42% of the country’s total employment.

**Toxic Tisza**

Romania’s still prodigious natural wealth has suffered erosion as a result of human activity. Agriculture, industrial development and urbanization, in particular, have affected biological diversity, both generally and at a local level. Pollution, the alteration of river courses and waterworks, mineral resource extraction and the overexploitation of biological resources as a whole have been main culprits contributing to the loss of fauna and flora. Particular “hotspots” have been caused by poor environmental management practices. In January 2000, spills from a gold reprocessing plant at Baia Mare in northern Romania flushed a toxic cocktail of cyanide and heavy metals into the Tisza river, killing fish and other life forms.

Some 400,000 hectares of wetlands, particularly along the Danube river and delta, have been drained in order to create arable land for agriculture. The Lower Green Danube Corridor project has been developed by WWF in cooperation with the governments of Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Ukraine to restore and protect the rich wetland ecosystems of the river and its delta.

The process of Romania’s accession to the European Union is already helping to address many of the country’s environmental problems, including introduction of more effective environmental controls and management. The greater challenge will be to ensure that the inevitable changes that will accompany EU membership, including economic growth and development, will enhance rather than erode Romania’s splendid natural wealth – a rich natural heritage for all European to treasure and preserve.

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**Useful links:**

- **Romanian Ministry of Waters and Environment Protection**
  [www.mappm.ro/](http://www.mappm.ro/)

- **Romanian National Biodiversity Strategy**
  [ariiprotejate.ngo.ro/docs/strategy/](http://ariiprotejate.ngo.ro/docs/strategy/)

- **Lower Danube Green Corridor**
  [archive.panda.org/livingwaters/danube/](http://archive.panda.org/livingwaters/danube/)

- **Danube Delta National Institute**
  [www.indd.tim.ro](http://www.indd.tim.ro)

- **NGOs:**
  - **Carpathian Ecoregion Initiative**
    [www.carpathians.org](http://www.carpathians.org)
  - **Carpathian Large Carnivore Project**
    [www.clcp.ro](http://www.clcp.ro)
  - **Pro Natura**
    [www.pronatura.ro](http://www.pronatura.ro)
  - **Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation**
    [www.epce.ro](http://www.epce.ro)

**Photo 1:** Danube delta, a paradise of birds.
**Photo 2:** Carpathian grey wolves.
**Photo 3:** Rezęat National Park