

European Chapter
of the Society for Ecological Restoration
p/o Research Institute for Nature and Forest
Kliniekstraat 25
1070 Brussels



International non-profit company N° 849.548.764

www.ser-europe.org

info@ser-europe.org

**Open letter to
Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland
Mrs. Beata Szydło
and
Minister of Environment of the Republic Poland
Mr. Prof. Jan Szyszko**

25th of May 2016

The Society for Ecological Restoration is an international non-profit organization dedicated to reversing ecosystem degradation caused by unsustainable human activities. The European branch of SER (SER-Europe) works to enhance ecological restoration of European habitats and biodiversity, in accordance with biodiversity strategy of the European Union.

Scientists associated in SER-Europe have been informed about the plans of the Polish government to largely increase logging activities in the Białowieża Forest in Eastern Poland, within areas which have recently undergone bark beetle outbreaks, resulting in large-scale die-back of spruce trees. Recently, the Polish Minister of Environment¹ proposed that one-third of the forest area, which is outside of the Białowieża National Park, but protected as a UNESCO Cultural and Natural Heritage and Natura 2000 site, remained under passive protection, whereas two-thirds would be “subjected to measures of ecological engineering through the implementation of forest management plans”. The official webpage of the ‘State Forests’ National Forest Holding, informs that “restoring natural habitats and preventing their decline are the primary objectives” of the mentioned plan². From the perspective of a professional organization, whose mission is to promote ecological restoration as a means of sustaining the diversity of life on Earth and re-establishing an ecologically healthy relationship between nature and culture, SER-Europe strongly opposes using the term **ecological restoration** to name the proposed logging and re-planting activities. This is a clear case of ‘pseudo-restoration’, where natural ecosystem properties and processes are ignored. We also reject claims that “it is not scientifically proven” or “not known” what is the best strategy to protect lowland broadleaf forests and their populations of endangered species. A similar case occurred about 20 years ago in forest National Parks of eastern Bavaria and the western Czech Republic. There, a no-intervention strategy was the best solution for the long-term conservation of these mountain forests.

Scientific research in the Bavarian Forest National Park (Germany) and the Šumava National Park (Czech Republic), where large areas were attacked by bark beetles in the 1990s, found that logging reduced

¹ Program for the Białowieża Forest as the cultural and natural UNESCO-heritage and the area of Natura 2000 network worked out by the Minister of the Environment.
https://www.mos.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/mos/Aktualnosci/marzec_2016/Program_-_Bialowieza_-_ENG.pdf. Accessed on 10 May 2016.

² <https://www.mos.gov.pl/en/news/details/news/action-programme-for-the-bialowieza-forest-signed/>. Accessed on 10 May 2016.

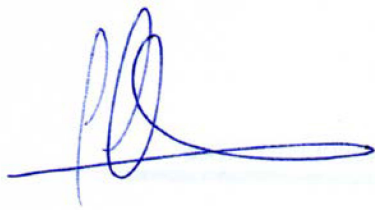
natural regeneration by up to 80%, and created low-diversity stands prone to further bark beetle infestation. In Bavaria, bark beetle management in National Parks was thoroughly discussed, and decisions and strategies were strongly backed up by scientists. There, prevention of logging was possible due to the firm opposition of politicians concerned by short-term economic interests compromising the long-term sustainability of mountain forests. In the Bavarian Forest National Park, infested spruces were removed only in marginal parts of the Park. In contrast, dead trees were kept in the core area, where natural regeneration was allowed, and biodiversity favored. Also in the Šumava National Park, scientific claims for passive conservation have finally been accepted, and strict conservation rules are now implemented over areas affected by bark beetle outbreaks.

Sections of the Białowieża Forest where logging is planned have the highest potential for recovery to a near-natural state. This will be facilitated by the occurrence of natural die-off and regeneration cycles. Furthermore, this cyclic process promotes the diversity of trees that is a major asset of these forests. Moreover, die-offs help the forest to re-adjust to environmental conditions and create forest communities that are more resilient to climatic changes. Dead spruce trees support rare species of European concern, as the beetle *Pytho kolwensis* and the Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*), and largely increases fungal and arthropod diversity. Indeed, tree die-back is being used in various countries as a management measure to restore biodiverse and resilient forests ecosystems. Stands of dead trees are important components of natural forest landscapes, helping diverse forest species (including spruce) to re-establish. In this context, planting trees is not recommended, and may actually promote an artificial forest structure of mono-specific, single-aged and genetically homogeneous tree populations. Removing old and dead trees and replanting, which may be appropriate in commercial forestry, is nonsense when conservation of biodiversity is set as the primary objective, as in the Białowieża Forest, a UNESCO Cultural and Natural Heritage and Natura 2000 site.

The Białowieża Forest is considered by European restoration ecologists as one of the most important reference areas for this type of forest, where natural forest dynamics can be understood. Reference areas as this are crucial for restoring biodiversity and ecosystem processes in near-natural and degraded European forests. The presence of natural ecological dynamics, only partly disturbed by previous management activities, is a major ecological value of this area. Currently, such processes are only protected within a relatively small part of the forest complex, i.e. the Białowieża National Park, whereas in the remaining part of the UNESCO heritage site, they will be destroyed by logging activities. To our knowledge, all scientific evidence and practical experience strictly argue against logging. Such interventions cannot be termed “forest restoration” and actually oppose the aims of nature conservation. Therefore, SER-Europe appeals to the Polish Government to immediately stop logging operations within the Białowieża Forest, and urges to re-consider previous initiatives of the Polish authorities to enlarge the territory of the National Park to cover the whole Białowieża Forest complex.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the Board of the European Chapter of the Society for Ecological Restoration



Prof. Dr. Jordi Cortina-Segarra
Chair SER Europe



Dr. Agata Klimkowska
Secretary SER Europe