



MARAMURES

A WWF *One Europe,* *More Nature Pilot Project Site*

WWF has initiated an innovative pilot project on the Oas-Gutai plateau in the beautiful mountainous Maramures region of northwest Romania. The goal of this One Europe, More Nature (OEMN) initiative is to protect and restore a biodiversity-rich mosaic of natural and semi-natural grasslands and meadows, while increasing incomes for local residents and farmers.

A new herd of a local cattle breed was introduced to graze on the mountain grasslands using traditional, ecologically-friendly, practices. The herd size and grassland area have already expanded, and this will continue as ever-more cattle and more farmers become involved. The farmers will receive new income through the sale of organically-certified “green beef” – a first in Romania. Incomes will also be derived through eco-tourism expansion which capitalizes on the enhanced landscapes and green beef, a new 19,602 ha Natura 2000 site and a “Greenways” tourist trail.

About the Project Area

Location

The project is located on the 1,470 km² Oas-Gutai plateau in the beautiful Carpathian “Maramures” province of northwest Romania – also the headwaters of the Tisza River.

Significant landscapes, habitats and species

The rural area is a biodiversity-rich mosaic of natural and semi-natural grasslands, meadows, forests and wetlands. Its outstanding collection of fauna and flora is one of the richest and most varied in Europe and it is home to Romania’s largest protected landscape area after the Danube Delta. Its forests (76,503 ha) include natural beech and oak complexes and vital habitat for flagship large carnivores of the Carpathians such as bears, wolves and lynx. Its grasslands (71,000 ha), with sub-alpine meadows and pastures, are perfect breeding grounds for many important bird species such as the Corncrake, and hunting areas for large raptors such as the Golden Eagle. Wetlands (260 ha) include 56 peat bogs with a rich fauna of protected amphibians and reptiles such as the Carpathian Newt and Viper, and carnivorous plants from the glacial era.

Human presence

A rural population of about 68,000 (46 inhabitants per km²) live around the largely uninhabited plateau in small, traditional, settlements. The three nearby cities are Baia Mare (pop. 145,000), Baia Sprie (15,900) and Sighetu Marmatiei (42,500). The region has a rich cultural heritage with many vibrant traditions linked to nature, and many of its beautiful landscapes and species were shaped through traditional practices and local customs. Notable traditional architecture and products include carved wooden gates, UNESCO (World Heritage recognized) medieval wooden churches, and folk clothing.

Economic status

Despite this natural and cultural wealth, rural incomes are generally low and unemployment is high. The economy and traditional sources of subsistence of the small settlements are based primarily on the use of natural resources from the area’s grasslands and forests. The nearby cities also depend on the plateau for many resources and services. On the grasslands, rural farmers have for centuries tended herds of regionally-specific Maramures brown cattle (“Bruna de Maramures”) and water Buffalo, using traditional practices for meat and dairy products. These shaped the creation of rich meadow ecosystems for a variety of protected plant, bird and animal species. Sheep have also been grazed for centuries, providing locals with cheese and wool used for traditional clothing, handicrafts and household goods.

Forests have long provided local residents and companies (including IKEA) with a wide range of products and services. These include timber for building materials and fuel, and the picking, harvesting and processing of wild foods (e.g. herbs, wild berries, mushrooms, and medicinal plants). Other rural economic activities include dairy and meat processing, eco-tourism and handicraft sales. The area’s wetlands help to reduce flood impacts downstream while plateau springs provide fresh, clean water to the residents of the villages and Baia Mare.

Problems



Local economic and legislative conditions have rapidly changed since 1990, especially with Romania’s accession to the EU in 2007. These changes have caused agriculture in many areas to become significantly less profitable or even no longer viable, the result being that many valuable natural and semi-natural grasslands have been abandoned by farmers and shepherds.

Poorer residents are forced to exploit the few opportunities they see as open to them, many of which are resource-based such as the illegal felling of trees for timber and fuelwood. One result is a loss of pristine forest.

A desire for quick profits has pushed many land-owners and users to undertake potentially lucrative activities that negatively impact the environment (e.g. fragmentation of forests for ski slope development).

Many large companies have also closed down recently, including the formerly large and predominant mining sector, accelerating a decline in local economic and social prospects.

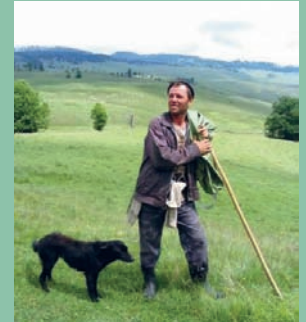
Solutions and Results



WWF's main goal is to protect and restore the plateau's biodiversity-rich mosaic of natural and semi-natural grasslands and meadows while increasing incomes for local residents and farmers.

The mechanisms used by WWF to reach this goal include:

(1) revitalizing traditional grazing; **(2)** producing and marketing organically certified “green beef”; **(3)** supporting the designation of a new Natura 2000 site; and **(4)** expanding eco-tourism.



1) Revitalizing traditional grazing

In 2007, WWF started a pilot project for the organic grazing of traditional cattle breeds high up on the plateau. WWF first purchased a herd of organically certified cows (22 cows and 4 bulls), joined them into a herd and “loaned” them to their new project “partner farmer” from the village of Giulesti, which borders the plateau. A contract with the partner obliged him to eventually extend his grazing territory (originally 19 ha of his private property plus 21 ha of rented communal grassland from the village of Giulesti) to up to 80 ha (by renting or buying additional lands). Thus the municipality of Giulesti also became a project partner.

The partner farmer uses traditional methods and the natural cyclical calendar for grazing and grass mowing. For example, grazing starts in the spring with post-winter vegetation growth, and mowing starts in July to allow for the natural re-seeding of grasslands. One of the many significant investments required by the farmer was for the construction of a winter shelter high on the plateau, to allow the herd to remain on the plateau year-round.

So far, grazing the cows in the highlands during the summer led to the restoration of 80 ha of high nature-value sub-alpine grassland and the project now has more than double the original amount of land. Grassland restoration will be extended as more grazing animals, farmers and landowners become involved. At the same time, the project has not been without concerns, such as cattle being bitten by snakes, or cows which at first did not know how to eat natural grass until they were shown how by older females in the herd.

Since the project began, 16 new calves were born. Any calves born are the property of the partner farmer. Some calves will later be slaughtered and some will be kept for breeding and extending the herd. The key to project success is that it is not a one-off activity but rather a “revolving herd” – after five years, and supervised by WWF, the first farmer will transfer the same number of animals he received to another farmer who will also graze them on plateau grasslands, allowing the total herd size to expand over time. Two local cattle breeder associations have now expressed interest to continue the project with its “revolving herd”.

2) Green beef

Some of the cows will be slaughtered to produce premium, organic “green” beef with a high selling price on the market, thereby providing additional incomes to the farmers. In 2008, after sustained WWF support, the grazing site and herd were subscribed to the Romanian organic certification system – a first in all of Romania. After an additional two-year conversion period, the farm and its produce will be fully certified as organic. WWF is also developing a market study and promoting a market niche (through linking in the minds of consumers the high quality beef production with nature conservation). Potential first customers include local tourist facilities, guesthouses, restaurants and local government cafeterias.

3) New Natura 2000 site

The OEMN project contributed to the designation of a new EU Natura 2000 site through sharing scientific data and raising awareness. The site consists of 19,602 ha of grassland habitats and is partially grazed by sheep, water buffalo and the WWF project's cows.

4) Eco-tourism development

Connecting the cultural attractions in Maramures to the stunning landscapes and nature offers much potential for tourism. Additional incomes are being derived through the expansion of eco-tourism. This will capitalize on the local landscapes that are being enhanced, especially the grasslands and new Natura 2000 site, the newly marketed green beef and a “Greenways Trail”. This informative trail, launched in June 2008, winds majestically up a mountain track and connects two wetland and two Natura 2000 sites.

The partner farmer also sees this potential and has developed tourism facilities linked to this conservation story, investing 280,000 Euro from his own sources into accommodation possibilities for 14 tourists in a rural pension in a nearby village. This, together with a new wooden cabana next to the project herd, near the end of the Greenways Trail overlooking grasslands and a pristine creek with wild trout, offer the visitor a unique natural experience.



OEMN Mission

WWF's One Europe More Nature (OEMN) project uses an innovative approach to forge unusual partnerships so that business and nature can co-exist. Its mechanisms lead to win-win solutions for all, allowing Europe's rural workers to make incomes from the countryside while protecting nature. OEMN, tested at many pilot rural locations throughout Europe, is now mainstreaming conservation into everyday European business life.

Other WWF OEMN pilot project sites

Prespa (Albania, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece), Väinameri (Estonia), Tisza Floodplains (Hungary), Merja Zerga (Morocco), Gelderse Poort (Netherlands), Sinca Noua (Romania), Doñana (Spain)

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