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Pro-Silva Annual General Meeting – Romania 2017

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When arriving in Sibiu, Romania for the Pro-Silva annual meeting I was grateful to a local couple I met at the airport, who asked if I wanted to share a taxi with them. They were heading into the city centre, as was I, where I was to meet members of the Pro-Silva group. The couple told me of their time working in Birmingham for a UK funded children's organisation and the demise of the program due to the economic downturn in 2010. Their English was very good and had a tinge of the Birmingham accent. They both refused to let me pay for my part of the taxi fare on arrival to my destination saying this was their welcome to me to Romania. What a pleasant greeting to Romania.

On my arrival to the hotel I met with the Pro-Silva Romania members who were friendly and accommodating from the off. The Pro-Silva group was founded in Slovenia in 1989 and are a collective of like-minded associates from 24 European countries. Pro-Silva focuses on the principles of economy, ecology and community benefits, which are integrated through a 'close to nature' technique of forest management. This management approach concentrates on a non clear-cut management method and on single tree selection. It is important that the biodiversity and ecology of the forested areas are kept in a healthy and resilient condition to help defend from biotic and abiotic catastrophes.

We spent three days travelling to forests within the Southern Carpathian Mountains close to Brasov and Bran, which is famed for its connections to gothic architecture and Dracula. My first impression of the forests we visited were the excellent condition of the many oak, beech and silver fir. I am used to seeing deer and grey squirrel damage here in the UK on mature and sapling trees alike. Regeneration was un-browsed, semi-mature trees were in tact and looked vigorous. Spacing's were naturalised and in non-linear formations, which is in a true close-to-nature fashion. There were many examples of symbiosis between mature oak and beech and in some stands ample thriving regeneration of silver fir, possibly due to low intensity cutting during the regeneration process. The healthy condition of the forests is I think also testament to the many freely roaming bear, lynx and wolves that work together to carefully maintain a balanced ecosystem. Romania seems like the ultimate place to see 'close-to-nature' management principles in action, as the 'lungs of Europe' appeared to be a thriving example of healthy, 'virgin forests'.

Romania has some of the last remaining virgin forests in Europe and has attracted the presence of Prince Charles. Pro-Silva Romania met with Prince Charles in Viscri (a listed UNESCO World Heritage site) earlier in June 2017. HRH met with members of the Pro-Silva Romania group to discuss the

group's desire to set up close-to-nature courses for the local community to help conserve the integrity of the surrounding forests.

One thing I noticed while being part of discussions during the forest visits, was that the forest policy in Romania seems vague with many loop holes which left forest management policy open to exploitation. So what are the loop-holes? In short, under the Communist regime, private property was seized from its owners and nationalised by the state. In 1989 when Communism fell, the private property was supposed to be handed back to the people. Allegedly this was an opportunity for corrupt politicians and organised crime groups to forge documents that lay claim to the forests and effectively 'steal' these assets, which were quickly sold to multinationals. Ownership is therefore unclear and control of what happens to the forests is in-flux. Overlapping claims for the same piece of land are currently causing ripples in the media. Big names such as the Austrian timber giant, 'Holzindustrie Schweighofer', has been investigated for over two years by the Environmental Investigation Agency, who has secretly recorded representatives of the timber giants offering to buy illegal timber on a number of different occasions. Also well-known organisations such as IKEA and Harvard University have all been highlighted in the news as allegedly obtaining Romanian forest land through fraudulent means (Bojin et al, 2016 / Environmental Investigation Agency Report, 2015)

Romanian forest management policy includes terminology such as 'conservation cuttings', which allows trees to be felled by removing low quality or badly formed trees, to improve the sanitary state of the forests, and to create conditions that ensure the permanency of continuous cover, which in turn creates suitable conditions for natural regeneration. This sounds positive but the wording on the laws is open ended and uses phrases such as; "The upper limit of the cuttings cannot be given..." and the extraction "...exceeding 10% of the standing volume, should be justified". These are subjective and open for exploitation as state 'planners' on a low wage can 'justify' what they see fit, and are allegedly being bribed to harvest more than they should (Discussion, personal correspondences, 2017).

I am currently studying for a Masters in Forestry as a distance learner at Bangor University and also work full time as an arboricultural surveyor. When I received backing from the Confor Education fund to go to Romania as a delegate for the 'Continuous Cover Forestry Group' (CCFG), I was delighted at the opportunity to find out more about unspoilt forests under 'non-conventional' management practices. The forestry press is currently highlighting the importance of resilient silviculture with regard to the challenges future climate change brings, and I believe that close-to-nature forestry has many of the answers to creating resilient forests. I would encourage anyone to visit these amazing places and to experience the last medieval forests left in Europe.

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REFERENCES

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