

The World Conservation Union, IUCN
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RE: Invitation - please, help us to save the Tatras - national natural heritage of Slovakia and a unique European heritage of the European Continent

Piešťany, December 12, 2004

Dear colleagues and friends,

We are writing to you, as our Tatra National Park (TANAP), the oldest one and the most prominent one in Slovakia, is in a great danger. This park represents some of the most valuable assets of our natural heritage. Tatras also become one of the most important national symbols of Slovakia, even the Slovak anthem sings about Tatras, many national poems and paintings concern Tatras as well.

The Tatra National Park (TANAP) has a European wide significance

In a relatively small area one finds 6 major altitudinal vegetation zones (submontane, montane, supra-montane, subalpine, alpine and subnival) with almost 1400 species of higher plants, many of them rare, threatened and endemic, e.g. crowfoot *Ranunculus altitatrencis*, primrose *Primula halleri* subsp. *Platyphylla* and many glacial relicts, such as saxifrage *Saxifraga retusa*. Concerning fauna, Tatra visitors know attractive Tatra endemites e.g. chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra tatrica*, marmot *Marmota marmota latirostris*. There are other important species, large carnivores – brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), northern lynx (*Lynx lynx*), further endemic rodent *Sorex alpinus taticus*, Tatra vole (*Pitymys taticus*), rare birds, e.g. capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), wall-creeper (*Tichodroma muraria*), nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*) and many others.

The Tatra National Park was badly hit by windstorm

In early evening hours, on November 19th, the severe windstorm, achieving in some places more than 190 km /hour (194 km /hour at Skalnaté pleso lake) felled mountain forest (formed predominantly by spruce) in 1/6 of the national park, the area hit is approximately 40 x 3 km large. We believe, the extent of damage is with high probability due to several main groups of factors. The first one was the lower health state of mountain forests, which had several reasons – the forests are weakened by acid depositions, heavy metals plus other toxic components and also by forestry economy (majority of the area was covered by spruce monocultures). The second group of factors is connected with a phenomena of climate change, as this leads also in Slovakia in last years to more frequent and more severe storms as well as to more floods. The third group of factors includes naturally high vulnerability of these high mountain forests, underlined to a certain extent also with the changed landscape structure – relatively high amount of recreational and sport facilities and roads are in the affected area.

The affected Tatra National Park is now severely threatened by big business

What happened to a large part of Tatra forest is very sad and it hit our hearts, but still, this is not an ecological catastrophe. However, environmental NGOs in Slovakia, artists, scientists, university teachers and others are afraid, that a real ecological catastrophe is just now being launched through the pressure of great business and its plans, which clearly misuse the situation after the storm. Big business ideas of development of new recreational and sport facilities inside the national park have currently clear support from the Slovak government. Another pressure is reflected in plans to harvest as soon as possible all the fallen trees, to increase profit, which means, 12 000 ha, 1/6 of the national park area will lose all the nutrients present in these trees. We are convinced, these activities will severely undermine ecological and environmental functions of the Tatra ecosystems already disturbed by windstorm (e.g. water retention, flood prevention, refugium of threatened species, hygienic and spa functions, etc.), thus they will negatively influence nature and people – not just in Tatra region.

As the oldest and most prominent national park in Slovakia is in danger, we kindly, but urgently ask The World Conservation Union for help. Please, help us to save the Tatra National Park.

We believe, it is very urgent, necessary and important:

- 1) To safeguard respect for the Slovakian law No. 543/2002 on conservation of nature and landscape and for international treaties: We kindly ask IUCN to express clearly towards Slovak government (event. also towards big business) IUCN standpoint, expressed in the description of the category II of protected areas – which says

that nature conservation is the primary function of a national park and all other activities inside the park should be subordinated to it. We are afraid, this point is not respected after the park area was hit by the storm. Implementation of this law includes also zonation of the national park area, in order to harmonize its functions – nature conservation, forestry, tourism, etc. We stress, that it is very important to approve zonation of TANAP prepared by the Management of the Tatra National Park. Also, it is necessary that Slovak Republic adheres to global Convention on Biological Diversity, which our government and parliament have ratified. Further obligation stem from the fact that TANAP is part of the network of the Biosphere Reserves.

- 2) To safeguard protection of the life-supporting ecological functions of TANAP ecosystems and to follow forest renewal in a way close to nature: We believe, it is necessary to leave at least 1/3 of the fallen trees on the spot – to allow nature to heal at least part of the area by itself – allowing natural ecological processes to take place. The fallen trees are an important source of nutrients and their branches even protect soil from the erosion. Currently, the tree branches are burned and heavy use of pesticides is planned as well. We ask you to help us to stop the use of the pesticides inside national park as these will kill many keystone species of Tatra ecosystems and severely undermine their capacities for natural renewal. We ask that forest renewal should be planned in a way very close to nature, which will lead to its future higher species diversity as well as age variability.
- 3) To safeguard the functions of the Tatra National Park – there are threats of submitting the nature conservation function under the interests of mass tourism development and forestry economy: We kindly ask you for help to stop development of plans, which will lead to enlargement of existing recreational and sport facilities or to building new ones, which will require also building new roads in the area of the national park. This will further undermine ecosystem services provided by the Tatra National Park, utilized by many people living far away from this area (e.g. water retention, flood prevention, preserving biological diversity, production of etheric oils – health function, etc.). We believe, in the framework of climate change, these functions require more, no less protection. We stress that this way of development, disrespecting national park mission may in fact drastically change the character of our most prominent national park and largely undermine its future long term capacity to satisfy the IUCN criteria for category II of the protected areas – national park.

For your information we add that after velvet revolution, in 1990 we had faced another attempt to change the character of the Tatra National Park: The interest of Tatra Mountain Corporation „to develop Tatras“ not only by building hotels and ski lifts but also new spas, golf-courses, artificial caves, etc.. This attempt was stopped and ended for its proponents as the Tatragate affair. Today the Tatra National Park again faces the threats to change its mission into a new funfair park... **To help to save one of the most marvellous national parks in the IUCN list, we kindly invite you to visit Slovakia and Tatra National Park,** to see the damage done by the windstorm and to discuss with our government, local authorities, business representatives, scientists, artists and NGOs the ways how to heal the Tatra National park in a way close to nature, how to avoid attempts which threaten its functions. We believe, Tatras may become the probing stone of nature conservation not only in Slovakia, but in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, where attractive areas are coming under severe stress of big business.

On behalf of the Living Planet, civic association: Ing. Peter Sabo, Ph.D., Executive director
On behalf of the A-project, non-profit org. RNDr. Vlasta Körnerová, Director
On behalf of the Society for Sustainable Living: Doc.RNDr. Mikuláš Huba, Ph.D., Chairman
On behalf of the Forest Protection Movement Wolf: Ing. Juraj Lukáč, Chief
On behalf of the Ekopolis Foundation Ing. Peter Medved', Director
On behalf of Regional Association for Nature Conservation and Sust.Dev.: RNDr. Tomáš Kušík, Chairman
On behalf of Nature Rangers Club in Bratislava: Ján Dobšovič, Chairman
On behalf of Sosna civic association: Ing. Štefan Szabó, Ph.D.
On behalf of Živica civic association: Mgr. Petra Ďurišová
On behalf of Friends of the Earth: Štefan Jančo, Representative
On behalf of Amber Trail Association Ján Roháč, Director
On behalf of the Slovak Union of Nature and Landscape Conservationists, Bratislava branch, K. Šimončíková