

## **Your Royal Highness,**

With deep respect and reverence, we would like to approach you with a request for support for efforts of people in Slovakia to preserve national parks and reserves in the country. Their importance reaches far beyond the borders of our country and they are sites of European importance, protected bird areas, national parks, biosphere reserves and UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Natural scientists and all educated people in our country were shocked to learn that the IUCN and other international environmental protection organisations are considering revising the international status of the Tatras National Park due to economic activity in nature reserves. Independent experts promote the idea that no timber felling or other activities be carried out in nature reserves, i.e. in at least 2% of the territory of Slovakia, since these nature reserves have been established to enable us to protect and study natural processes, including large-scale natural disturbances. Moreover, many high-quality ecological studies have shown that processes of natural regeneration, secondary succession and recovery after disturbances predictably lead to higher stability and better biodiversity than artificial forest restoration.

Instead of a scientific discussion on these findings, the Slovak Ministry of the Environment is planning to punish scientists for research work in nature reserves. Criminal action is being prepared against persons who, referring to their constitutional obligations, protected parts of Tichá and Kôprová Valleys that belong to the zone of strictest protection against the entry of trucks and tractors and against timber felling devastating rare habitats of Community importance in this reserve. More than 2000 people from Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland came to express their support for restraint from intervention in nature reserves through the “Territory Protected by the Public” declaration; more than 28 000 people have signed a protest against these interventions; and, the ongoing “Trees We Do Not Need to Worry About” petition has been signed by more than 22 000 people.

People in Košice have organised a silent protest entitled “Professionally, Not Politically”, when they learnt about the pressure put on an environmental inspector who stopped timber felling in Tichá Valley. 109 renowned Slovak scientists and academics from the fields of natural sciences and forestry have protested against timber felling plans in Tichá and Kôprová Valleys together with the Slovak Botanical Society of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The WWF also considers these interventions to be illegal. 182 employees of the Slovak State Nature Protection organisation have signed a letter drawing attention to the pressure from their superiors leading to the distortion and concealment of scientific findings – many of them have already lost their jobs. 130 scientists requested ministries that they immediately stop chemical spraying in the Low Tatras National Park with no response from competent authorities. The Ekofórum, a network of 20 leading environmental NGOs in Slovakia, has sent out several letters and requests to the Minister of the Environment; in addition, the Ekofórum and scientists together sent him a request to hear out the other party in this dispute. These letters and requests have been neither acknowledged nor responded to by the competent authorities.

Instead of achieving restoration of legality of official environmental protection policies, the largest forest protection NGO, the VLK forest protection group, which has won dozens of court disputes with the state administration, has only received ill-treatment and attempts to damage its good name.

Although the media provide air-time to both sides, the Television Board expressed concerns that the only expert discussion on public television about the issue and protection of nature reserves that took place after the windstorm was biased. Just a week ago, the government, represented by the Ministry of the Environment, announced further measures incompatible with the mission of national parks, as well as the fact that it would not discuss these measures with anyone.

As the above shows, the aim of this letter is to inform you that not only the communication between the state administration and the public about the preservation of national parks and reserves in Slovakia, but also the possibilities for effective exercise of the right to healthy environment are diminishing.

In our opinion, the reasons for this situation lie in a number of legal regulations, which have caused that the state administration is no longer independent and it is under strong pressure from a narrow circle of lobbyist groups. This is demonstrated by suppression of public participation in taking charge of their environment, weakening of control mechanisms and transparency, concentration of power, questionable tenders, undermining of the independence of the media, rejection of dialogue with professionals, failures to meet agreements with administrations of other national parks and the promotion of solutions, which, despite subsidies involving billions of crowns, will prove to be a loss in the long run. This loss will not only be financial, we will also lose our most precious natural and landscape values.

Yours sincerely,

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**Ing. Karol Kaliský**, forester, former employee of the Tatras National Park Administration

**Ing. Tomáš Vančura**, former director of the Tatras National Park Administration

**Ing. Pavol Polák**, forest ecosystems expert