

Notes on the Białowieża Forest



Upon entering the strictly protected area of the Białowieża National Park, you are told that you are entering a forest which still looks like European forests of thousands of years ago. The Białowieża forest covers just 1500km², of which 900km² is on the Belarussian side of the border, where the interpretation of conservation does not always conform to conventional 'Western' thinking.



Of the 600km² of the Bialowieza forest which lies inside Poland's borders, just 17% (c. 100 km²) is under the strict protection of the National Park. The remainder (some 500 km²) is owned and managed by the Polish Forestry Commission. Within the National Park there are 1200 trees of with a girth greater than 450cm and in the remaining 500km² of the forest there are a further 1200 such trees. Poland has, in total, 33000 trees which qualify as monuments of nature. The Bialowieza forest thus far boasts an additional 22000 trees which do not get registered, since the whole forest is protected

The Forestry Commission has a quota to cut down 1million cubic metres of timber over a ten year period. Loggers are cutting into virgin forest and many of the trees they are taking for timber were not planted by man. There is an opportunity to extend the size of the National Park, perhaps by a large percentage, but there is strong opposition. This opposition comes from the hunting community (which has senior representatives in each of the major Polish political parties) and from the local community, which focuses rather on short term interests than the long-term conservation picture. High profile visits – such as that by King Juan Carlos of Spain in 2004 – do not help. He visited Bialowieza to shoot bison, despite the official ban on bison hunting. The European Bison is the largest European mammal and hovers on the edge of extinction. Bialowieza is home to the vast majority of all remaining European bison, which are estimated to number just several hundred. We are unlikely to see bison as they are normally seen at dawn!

Europe no longer has forests of the scale seen several hundred years ago; neither does it have forests the size found in other continents. This is all the more reason why it is imperative to protect what little we still have and enlarge it while we can, so that Bialowieza doesn't suffer a European version of the fate of the Amazon. The hunted bison, boar and red deer will soon be forgotten by all except those who shot them. On the other hand we have a golden opportunity to leave a lasting legacy for Poland and Europe by preserving this unique area. Bialowieza is Poland's only natural UNESCO World Heritage site.

<http://bpn.com.pl/>

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<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/33>

