

STIPA: Saving Transylvania's Important Pastoral Agro-Ecosystems

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This text presents a brief outline of the LIFE+ project currently being carried out to improve the conservation status of large areas of dry grasslands whilst fostering sustainable local development in Southern Transylvania, Romania.

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As outlined by the EDGG in Science piece in this Bulletin (p. 8), Transylvanian grasslands contain some of the highest levels of plant species richness in the world. Formed over centuries of low-intensity agricultural use, these grasslands are embedded within High Nature Value farming landscapes and intimately linked to human farming practices.

STIPA is a new LIFE+ project, with co-financing from Orange Romania, focusing on extensive dry grasslands in the Târnavă Mare SCI (Site of Community Importance) - an area of Saxon Transylvania recognized for its natural and cultural heritage. The aim of the project is to improve the conservation status of two Natura 2000 priority habitats, 6210* Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*) with important orchid sites, and 6240* Sub-Pannonic steppic grasslands. Preliminary mapping shows that these two habitat types are quite common in the area, covering 5895 ha (approximately 7 % of the whole SCI).

The two main threats to dry grassland habitats in this region are overgrazing in easily accessible areas, and abandonment in more marginal areas. By combining research and mapping to identify the type and location of threats with the application of practical measures, involving local communities, the project aims to ensure the long-term survival of these species-rich grasslands.

Coordinated by the local NGO Fundatia ADEPT Transilvania, this three-year project was started in late 2010 and is currently midway through implementation of measures and gathering the first results from the activities last year. These include:

- Identification of the locations of 6210* and 6240* habitats within the 85,000 ha Târnavă Mare SCI using information from Digital Elevation Models (preselection of sites with a southern and south-western aspect and more than 15% incline), followed by validation on the ground. This approach to use of Digital Elevation Models, developed by project partner Daphne Institute of Applied Ecology (Ján Šeffer, Bratislava) proved very strong in its prediction of target dry-grassland habitats, and thus is an effective way to focus precious field-work in large landscapes.

- Establishing conservation action plans for 6210* and 6240* habitats in the region, based on local practices and the needs of the specific area.

- Establishing conservation priority zonation in the area, identifying particularly threatened or important areas. Some of these areas will be nominated as micro-reserves and simple and practical management agreements will be created in collaboration with land owners.

- Implementing habitat restoration measures. These mainly comprise mowing and scrub clearance using specially acquired low-impact motorized mowers, and assisting farmers in meeting the required conditions for entry into Agri-Environment schemes

- Carrying out awareness-raising activities in schools, and in the farming and wider community. These include educational activities, the distribution of indicator plant and lepidoptera species identification cards and information booklets, and linked to this the involvement of local people in monitoring of results as a means of awareness-raising.

- Working with policy-makers, raising the profile of grassland diversity and providing inputs into the design of national and regional agri-environment schemes for the 2013-2019 period, as well as into the integrated management plan for the Târnavă Mare Natura 2000 site.

This is an example of a large-scale, applied conservation project integrating conservation of dry grassland habitats with support of local farming and livelihoods. The key to protecting this landscape is to work at multiple levels – from mapping based on state of the art ecological knowledge, to educational activities with the local community, to practical conservation interventions such as scrub clearance, to feeding into policy at the regional and national level. It is hoped that the outcomes of this project will be of use to future grassland conservation in Europe, in addition to ensuring the survival of the species-rich grassland landscape in Târnavă Mare.

For more information, please see

<http://www.fundatia-adept.org/?content=lifepus> .



The low-impact mowing machine at work,



Grasslands in flower in the Saxon villages region.



Cristi Gherghiceanu of Fundatia ADEPT doing Brielmeier demonstration, overlooking his village of Viscri.