

Post-conference report for the 13th Eurasian Grassland Conference 2016 in Sighisoara, Romania



Between the 20th and 24th of September 2016, 85 participants from 25 countries met in Sighisoara in Southern Transylvania for the 13th annual conference of the Eurasian Dry Grassland Group (see Fig 1. for a breakdown of the coun-

- Reflecting Ecology in Policy, led by Jabier Ruiz, Caitriona Maher (European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism) & Clunie Keenleyside (Institute for European Environmental Policy)

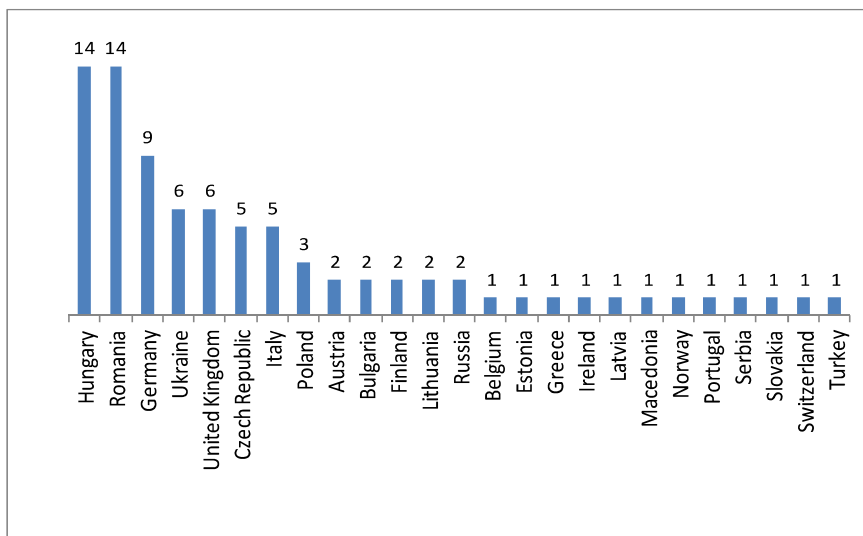


Figure 1. Breakdown of the 25 countries of the 85 participants

tries). In contrast to the previous 12 “EDGM, European Dry Grassland Meetings”, this year it was decided to change the name to “Eurasian Grassland Conference” to reflect the changing scope of these events. Nevertheless, the conference in Sighisoara continued many of the traditions of previous events, and below we provide some pictures and numbers as a reminder to those who joined, and to give an impression to readers who were not there!

The focus of this year’s conference was Management and Conservation of Semi-Natural Grasslands: from Theory to Practice. Following the theme “from theory to practice”, the pre-conference workshops focused on:

- Scientific Writing, led by Péter Török (University of Debrecen);
- Establishing and Maintaining National Grassland Databases, led by Kiril Vassilev (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences);

Figure 2: Joern Fischer giving the first keynote talk of the conference (photo: L. Gherghiceanu).

The main conference took place in the newly renovated hall of the Municipality of Sighisoara, which was kindly lent to us free of charge. The Mayor Ovidiu Mălăncrăvean welcomed all the participants at the opening of the conference. The excellent food and a lot of additional assistance was provided by Mihai Serengeu of the central Park Hotel. Our special thanks to these two.

The first keynote was given by Professor Joern Fischer of Leuphana University of Lüneburg in Germany, summarising the results of his 5-year transdisciplinary project in Southern Transylvania, the region where the EGC took place.

His research team integrated social and ecological research methods to address the issue of sustainable land use in the region. Based on their findings they produced future scenarios for the social and ecological landscape to stimulate de-



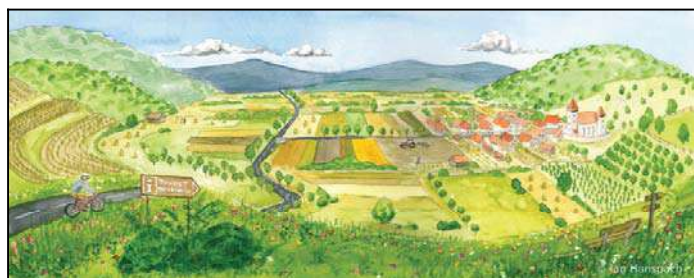


Figure 3. One of the scenarios ("Balance brings Beauty") created and visualized by Joern Fischer (picture by Jan Hanspach, Leuphana University of Lüneburg)

bate about what conservationists and other actors could do to promote sustainable development, not only in the study region but perhaps also in other similar landscapes (Fig 3.).



Figure 4. Dr. Cristina Craioveanu talking about the evolution of semi-natural grasslands in her keynote (photo: L. Sutcliffe).

The second keynote talk was given by Dr. Cristina Craioveanu together with Professor László Rákossy of the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. It focused on the evolution of grasslands in Transylvania and their present day value and conservation, and how research can contribute to this.

In total, there were 26 talks clustered around the topics of grassland policy and socio-economics, management and restoration, ecology and biodiversity, and historical evolution. 32 posters were presented on a wide range of grassland-relevant topics, as well as one poster on arable weeds in low-intensity cultivation systems. We would like to congratulate again the winners of the Young Investigator Prizes for outstanding talks or posters by researchers under the age of 35: Csaba Tölgyesi, Orsolya Valkó, Tsvetelina Terziyska, Szilvia Raócz, Ágnes Balázs and Eugen Görzen (Fig. 5). Prizes for the winners were kindly donated by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and Pelagic Publishing.



Figure 5. The awards ceremony for the Young Investigator Prizes (from top to bottom and left to right: Csaba Tölgyesi, Ágnes Balázs, Eugen Görzen, Tsvetelina Terziyska, Szilvia Raócz and Orsolya Valkó (photos: A. Kuzemko, J. Dengler, P. Török).



Figure 6. The clock tower just above the conference location in Sighisoara. The medieval citadel is one of the few in Europe still inhabited today (photo: D. Ambarli).

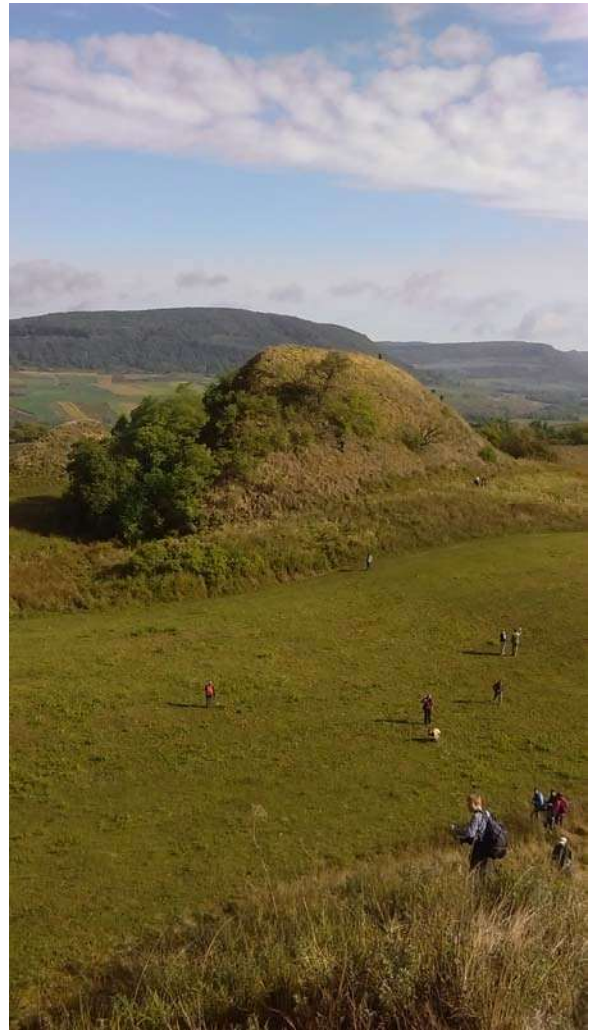


Figure 7. Slumping hills in Apold, which support a high diversity of plant species ranging from dry grassland species such as *Stipa* spp. to more mesic species (photo: M. Vrahnakis).



Figure 8 and 9. Grassland party with local dancers in the barn in Viscri (photos: J. Dengler, L. Gherghiceanu).



Post-conference excursion (Photos: L. Gherghiceanu, J. Dengler)

After the first day of talks, we took a tour in the beautiful citadel of Sighisoara (Fig. 6) and learnt that there are much more interesting historical facts about the town than the myth of Dracula. The town was first settled by the German-speaking Transylvanian Saxons in the 12th century, and survived many attacks and bombardments to become a thriving centre of trade and craft.

The mid-conference excursion took the participants to two sites with slumping hills (*movile*) that are characteristic for Transylvania (Fig. 7). The group visited the office of the NGO Fundatia ADEPT, the main local organizer. ADEPT has been working for over 10 years in the region to promote biodiversity conservation through small-scale, low-intensity farming.

A walk through the grasslands of Viscri was followed by the grassland party, with excellent food, local dancers and musicians (Fig. 8 and 9).

The post-conference excursion was attended by about 40 participants, guided by the local ecologist László Demeter. It gave them the opportunity to explore the mountain hay meadows of the Csik mountains/Gyimes region of Transylvania, as well as try their hand at practical landscape conservation (scything)!

The conference brochure and the book of abstracts are available to download from the conference homepage at <http://egc2016.namupro.de/>.

The conference organizers would like to thank all the participants of the 2016 EGC in Sighisoara for their interesting talks and posters and many stimulating conversations, and we hope you will visit this beautiful region again!

Useful links:

Website of the EGC 2016 in Sighisoara: <http://egc2016.namupro.de>

Publications on the natural heritage of the area by Fundatia ADEPT: www.fundatia-adept.org/?content=publications

Pogany-havás association: <http://poganyhavas.hu/main.php>

General information about the region of Târnava Mare in Southern Transylvania:

<http://www.discoverarnavamare.org>

European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism:

<http://www.efncp.org>

Institute for European Environmental Policy:

<http://www.ieep.eu>

The blog of Joern Fischer and his team:

<https://ideas4sustainability.wordpress.com>

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Cirsium tuberosum, *Dipsacus fullonum*, *Colchicum autumnale*—some species from the Transylvanian grasslands visited during the mid-conference excursion (photos: J. Dengler)

Report From IAVS Grantees

Anikó Csecserits, Hungary

First of all I would like to say a great thanks for the IAVS and EDGG supporting my participation on the 13th EGC in Sighișoara, Romania. It was a great experience for me!

I have taken part in several conferences (formerly meetings) organized by the EDGG and these were all very interesting and friendly, thus I was waiting for a similar experience. And I was not disappointed: in contrast, the hospitality and kindness of the conference organizers was excellent, the presentations were very good and the social events were perfect.

It was very interesting for me to hear about the situations of grassland conservation in different countries, I liked especial the presentations about the Romanian and Turkish grasslands. It was really good to hear about the effects of the recent social changes in Transylvania, which in turn caused changes in land-use and the main grazing animals, and therefore the vegetation of grasslands.

There were many presentations describing grassland vegetation dynamics and the reasons behind it. I liked very much the presentations about the effect of shrub encroachment, about the seed dispersal potential of geese or effects of burning on different animal and plant groups. Another group of presentations described the present vegetation of grassland, searching for the reason for the present state of grasslands and searching for good indicators. These all are also important questions for practical nature conservation. I think, it could be formulated more simply: we should know - as exactly as it possible - what should we conserve? Should we conserve the present land-use, the present species composition, the present structure of vegetation or something else? In which situations can the natural dynamics be left undisturbed and in which not? And what can we do with the present global effects: climate change, invasive species and pollution? I think it is always important to speak about these questions in order to formulate more precise research aims and thus probably we get better answers.

And last but not least I would like to write a little about my impression about the town of Sighișoara. In Hungary if somebody hear the name of this city, the first thing is what come in her/his mind is, that this is the place, where one of our most important (if not the most important) poet, Sándor Petőfi died in a battle during the war of independence in 1849. And his favourite landscape (and birth place) was the Hungarian Lowland, a huge grassland at that time! In one of his famous poems he wrote about the huge herds of cattle and horses grazing on this grassland. If possible, I would like to cite a detail from it, because it describes the vegetation of this area so well: a mosaic of grassland, shrubs and trees. (sorry, the English translation is not the best)

*„Near the inn is the dwarfed poplar wood,
Yellow is the sand with melons rich;
There where the screaming hawk her nest doth build,
Where, undisturbed by children, she may rest.
There grows the sad, sad "orphan's hair" and blossoms
Blue, of buckthorn, 'bout whose cooling stems
The parti-colored lizards wind themselves
To rest themselves in noonday heat. Beyond,"*

Sándor Petőfi: Az Alföld (Lowland), detail, translation:

<http://mek.oszk.hu/03900/03966/html/poetry3.htm#bm235>



Denys Vynokurov, Ukraine

*It was very nice well organized conference. It was held in the heart of the Medieval town of Sighișoara, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. There were very interesting posters and presentations. I have got a lot of new ideas about grassland management and conservation from different experienced researchers from all over Europe. I participated in both excursions. The first one introduced us to Transylvanian Steppes. Here we saw such species as *Stipa pulcherrima*, *S. capillata*, *Artemisia pontica*, *Inula ensifolia*, *Aster amellus* etc. The second excursion was in the Csik Mountains. During both excursions we felt the local flavor with pálinka, goulash, ciorbă and other traditional dishes. I will remember also very nice Romanian national music and dances.*

Dragana Cavlovic, Serbia

Held in charming medieval city of Sighișoara, EDGG conference was enchanting by itself.

Very well organized, no delays, professional, obliging.

All sessions have had content that is closely related to my current research and PhD thesis, and therefore very interesting to me. Both oral and poster sessions were of high quality and very substantial.

Thursday excursion was splendid. Beautiful landscapes, extraordinary scenes of nature, people, culture.. And researchers "ant-like" climbing movile (see photo2)... just splendid.

*I even had an opportunity to observe, and keep track of potentially invasive species near the roads, such as *Heilanthus taxa*, which is much more present than *Aster lanceolatus* (one of the most invasive species in neighbor Serbia).*

I learned a lot about Transylvania, traditional management of grasslands, and culture as well. I had a great time, enjoyed company of the other fellow researchers, and hope to attend the Conference in Latvia next year.

P.S. The food was delicious!



Nina Polchaninova, Ukraine

I really appreciate the IAVS financial support that helped me to take part in the conference. The first workday was of a great importance for me as it concerned environmental policy, management and dry grassland restoration – the subject our research team works on. I gained valuable experience to apply in our future research in the steppes of eastern Ukraine. The second day was full of new impressions: unknown landscapes, autumnal Transylvanian grasslands, informative historic excursion, and Romanian national cuisine and dances, which won my heart. The third day forced me to think again about the biodiversity conservation and maintenance. So, in three words, that was useful, captivating, delicious! The conference gave me a boost of energy and information, and inspired me to continue comprehensive studies of steppe communities. Special thanks go to the conference organizers who resolved all the problems and made our stay in Sighisoara comfortable and unforgettable.

Solvita Rusina, Latvia

The programme of the conference covered various diverse topics, including both scientific and practical aspects of grassland management. Hence, the conference provided the opportunity to enhance knowledge about already known management and conservation methods and to discuss other potential solutions. Two excursions provided an excellent ground to experience different management methods and to evaluate them through a discussion among experts from various fields.

The half-day workshop "Reflecting Ecology in Policy" was an excellent workshop. It was a great opportunity to discuss the problems and challenges in developing new agri-environment schemes with highly experienced agri-environmental policy. The workshop was very timely given the fact that the evaluation of the previous Rural Development Programme has almost ended and new ideas for the period from 2020 onwards are being elaborated. Results-based agri-environment schemes were presented as one of the most recent developments in targeted conservation measures. As a result of the participation in this event, new professional contacts have been established.

Eugen Görzen, Germany

The EGC 2016 in Sighișoara was a perfect platform to meet other grassland researchers and environmentalists from all over Eurasia in a professional but likewise familiar atmosphere. The event was very well organized and the organizing committee achieved a proper balance between the sessions, filled with interesting talks and nice poster presentations, and accompanying events like the excursions to the hay meadows in the Csik Mountains, the HNV Grasslands at Târnava Mare or the visit of Viscri. In between, I also had enough time for inspiring conversations and discussions with other participants.

The conference location of the EGC 2016 in Transylvania seemed extraordinary appealing to me, not only due to its amazing setting in the historic old town of Sighișoara, but also because my research is focused on Transylvanian semi-natural grasslands. And in fact, this conference was a great opportunity for me to meet and have a vivid exchange with other grassland researchers and nature conservationists working in Transylvania, including the people of Fundatia ADEPT.

Being interested in the practical implementation of grassland conservation and management measures, I also attended the pre-conference workshop "Reflecting Ecology in Policy", led by Jabier Ruiz, Caitriona Maher and Clunie Keenleyside. It was exciting to debate about the big challenges in the interface between policy and grassland conservation and to learn from experts who already had a lot of experience in the fields of conservation policy and the implementation of measures in different European countries. The only problem with the workshop was the limited time available which could be extended at future events.

Thanks to the IAVS for the travel grants! I am pleased that I was able to attend the EGC 2016 and I am looking forward to the next EDGG events!

