

BIAŁOWIEŻA PRIMEVAL FOREST

The Last Remnant of Pristine Woodlands Between Conservation and Eco-Tourism

BY TOMASZ SAMOJLIK

► **Białowieża Primeval Forest (BPF)** which covers about 1500 km² is not the largest woodland in Poland and Belarus, but it is undoubtedly the most recognized one. The fragments of primeval forest that survived many wars, political changes and management regimes, make Białowieża a special place for everyone interested in natural processes as undisturbed by humans, as it is possible in European lowlands. A central part of the forest, straddling the Polish-Belarusian border, is strictly protected; on the Polish side, Białowieża National Park covers over 100 km², and on the Belarusian side, the strict reserve covers about 160 km². It was granted a status of World Heritage Site and UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Reserve. However, the larger part of the forest on both sides is currently exploited for timber, though with varying intensity.

Annually, 130,000 tourists visit BPF to see European bison, hike in primeval woods, do bird-watching, and perform other ecologically-oriented activities. Tourism is a serious source of income for the local community, but further increase of visitors has its limits. Pristine forest is a fragile ecosystem. Thus, already now, the access to the reserve is strictly regulated.

With its nearly 200-year tradition, the scientific research in BPF has predominantly focused on pristine nature, as biologists tended to perceive the great primeval forest of Białowieża as an ecological model and reference point for other temperate ecosystems in Europe (eg. Faliński 1986). Human footprints in BPF, nicely featured in popular books (eg. Schama 1995), have only recently become subject of scientific endeavours. Studies in environmental history of BPF may answer the question how the Forest located in the heart of Europe survived in such a good condition, and what traces of past human activities are still visible in the ecosystem. As evidenced by scarce archaeological, palynological, and written sources available, in historical times BPF was slightly but steadily influenced by humans, with patches of deforested land constituting 5-15% of the contemporary Forest area. Ancient and early medieval settlers inhabited small glades inside the forest, and as of the 14th century BPF became a strictly protected royal game preserve of Polish kings, Lithuanian dukes, and (in the 19th century) Russian czars. The research conducted so far suggests that the centuries-long administrative protection, combined with traditional sustainable use of non-timber resources, has led to preservation of the forest itself and also allowed for the survival of its most fascinating animal, the European bison (Samojlik and Jedrzejewska 2004). It was only in the 20th century, that economic-scale timber exploitation began to threaten the natural character of BPF.



European bison, the largest European land animal, roaming in Białowieża Primeval Forest, Poland

Photo by R. Kowalczyk

The environmental history study currently carried out in BPF aims at reconstructing the main ways of forest use in the past and determining their impact on the ecosystem. Such results can be translated into concrete actions, both in the fields of conservation as well as eco-tourism. First, the reconstruction of the extent, durability, type, and role of human impact on the forest through time is highly relevant to present protection

needs. It can give conservationists new historical arguments for strengthening and adjusting the protection rules and regimes. The historical context has already been used by ecologists in the campaign for enlarging the Białowieża National Park (created in 1921 and expanded in 1996), and establishing a small nature-archaeological reserve in 1979. Also, by showing how sustainable use was functioning in the past, environmental history may change the way of thinking about forest usage nowadays. Hopefully,

the decision-makers will be guided towards sustainable multi-purpose use of various resources rather than simply timber exploitation.

The reconstruction of the past could also be a magnet for visitors. Ancient barrow and stone graves surrounded by the old trees, places with well-recognized history of settlement, and forest ranges connected with royal hunts appeal to imagination. Some of the existing tourist trails already refer to the history of BPF, but usually in a rather general and banal way. This could be improved by communicating the research results. Yet another possibility is the reconstruction of traditional crafts (such as forest beekeeping, traditional use of mushrooms, medicinal plants, forest fruits, wood types) in the form of an outdoor museum or seasonal workshops.

Last but not least, environmental history may help forest managers to preserve or restore some old, relic forms of anthropogenic landscape within BPF, such as wooded meadows, and glades with single ancient oaks, which are often reservoirs of a unique biodiversity of plants and invertebrates. Conclusively it can be said that, in the case of the Białowieża Primeval Forest, environmental history appears to have a good potential of linking conservation needs to sustainable eco-tourism development.

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REFERENCES at www.ihdp.org/updatehistory05/references.htm

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