

'Timber Mafia' threatens the future of Romania's ancient forests

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Widespread illegal logging is endangering Romania's old-growth forests, which are disappearing at an alarming rate.

Romania's old-growth forests are vast ancient woodlands that straddle the Carpathian Mountains in Eastern Europe. They have survived unchanged since the end of the ice age. But now these extraordinary forests are disappearing at an alarming rate and once gone, they can never be fully restored.

There is growing outrage about the environmental crimes committed by what has been dubbed the "Timber Mafia" – criminals who many believe operate hand-in-glove with the Romanian authorities.

"They (the forests) are fragile and they need to be preserved," said Orieta Hulea, WWF Romania's country director, explaining why these forests are so important to Europe.

"They are vivid examples of how natural processes shape an ecosystem that is untouched by humans.

"Old-growth forests have a spectacular composition. It's this mix of old trees and young trees creating a mosaic of habitats that is a shelter for a very rich biodiversity. More than half the population of bears lives in Romania. About 30 percent of the wolf population. We have lynx, we have wild cats. These forests are of infinite value: the aesthetic value, the inspirational value, the spiritual value of these forests," she said.

No one doubts the importance of the forests. Talk to the timber companies that are turning them into planks and chipboard and they will tell you they can trace the origin of every tree they process to ensure it has been sustainably sourced; ask the government and they will tell you they have put in place stringent measures giving these ancient woodlands unprecedented protection; and talk to Ikea, the world's biggest consumer of timber, whose sister company, Ingka Investment, is the largest private forest owner in the country, and you will be told that the strict environmental protocols that apply in their forests and down their supply chain go far beyond any legal requirements.

Threats, attacks and scandals

So why are the forests disappearing? And why are those who are trying to halt this destruction being threatened, beaten and sometimes killed?

Gabriel Paun is the founder of the Romanian NGO, Agent Green, which works on issues of environmental protection, and is the country's most celebrated forest activist. His run-ins with illegal loggers have almost cost him his life on more than one occasion. "If one tries to mess up with the interests of the forest mafia, you get in trouble and you can even die. Anything can happen ..." he told me when we met in the small town of Resita, deep inside Transylvania.

“If you are a decent forester within the system and you are young and enthusiastic and you want to do right, the system will not allow you. They will either teach you how to shut your mouth and look away or how to steal. But if you want to fight the system – they will eliminate you,” he continued.

Over the last few years, he added, at least six forest rangers have been murdered, others have died in suspicious circumstances, and there have been more than 650 attacks with knives, axes and guns.

More than half of all timber logged in Romania is illegal, which means it is taken from areas which are supposed to be protected, or harvested in such huge quantities that quotas are breached and entire forests simply disappear.

The biggest player in Romania’s forestry business is Romsilva, which is state-owned and controls 48 percent of Romania’s woodlands. It is also supposed to administer nature conservation.

But Romsilva has been plagued by scandals in recent years. During the course of filming for [our People & Power investigation](#), we spoke to several employees, past and present, sometimes under the condition of anonymity, who claim the company has at times been infiltrated by criminals.

One former employee, a biologist who raised concerns over logging in National Parks, told us she was lured to a remote woodland and only narrowly escaped being murdered there. Another former employee, a forest ranger, told us after refusing to allow illegal logging in his range, he was first threatened by his superiors, then beaten and left for dead in the forest. When I raised these claims with Romsilva’s director, he laughed and dismissed them as “rather far-fetched”. There was, he said, “zero tolerance” for any such illegality. But we heard many such stories from the people we met.

Corruption and illegal wood

Like much of Eastern Europe, Romania has been dogged by rampant corruption since the collapse of Communism. Paun believes this is what attracts the foreign timber companies that dominate the market there.

“Why would you come to a country with so much corruption ... I guess it’s convenient. It fits the principle of a big mouth fed by dirty hands. If I were a company and knew there is so much corruption in Romania, I would hesitate. But no, they come ... all these big companies come to Romania,” he said.

By far the biggest operator in the country is HS Timber, formerly known as Holzindustrie Schweighofer. It has wood processing plants throughout Romania, consuming the trees from its forests at what seems like breakneck speed. The company flatly denies any involvement in the illegal timber trade despite the existence of covert video recordings of its officials admitting to buying illegal wood.

The recordings set alarm bells ringing, and not only with the environmentalists. According to Mikhail Tarasov, Ikea’s global forest manager: “We stopped accepting wood from Holzindustrie Schweighofer around 2017 when the information about wrong doings became public.”

Nevertheless, Ikea had previously been buying timber from the company and even today, as Tarasov conceded during his interview with us: “It would be impossible to say that there is not any single cubic metre which would enter our supply chain that could not have a wrong origin.”

The biggest private forest owner in Romania is Ingka Investment, which falls within the Ikea Brand Group of companies and Tarasov is keen to assert their credentials. “Ingka Forests in Romania are really working very hard to implement what we believe is needed to secure legal and beyond legal

requirements," he said.

However, the industry's critics say that even if the wood is legally sourced that does not always mean it is done in a sustainable way. Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas covering Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats, and Ingka is just one of many companies exploiting these precious ecosystems. The Natura 2000 site which Ingka is logging is called Penteleu. It is full of spectacular old-growth forest - the key habitat which supports an abundance of flora and fauna, and yet, according to a forest action plan we saw, it seems to be these very trees which are to be logged out as a matter of urgency.

The situation in Romania has become critical and the European Commission has launched an infringement procedure against Romania for failing to stop illegal logging, the final step before the case goes to the Court of Justice of the European Union.

And yet Gelu Puiu, the country's secretary for state for forests, a former senior manager at Romsilva, seemed sanguine when we interviewed him: "We have taken measures at reducing crime as well as improving sustainable management thus we can confidently say that we are now on the right road. Last but most importantly, the forest is the winner."

Frankly, I found such assurances hard to square with reality. During the two weeks we spent travelling through the Carpathians, we covered almost 5,000km (3,106 miles) and it was impossible not to see what was happening there: The gradual destruction of a unique and precious ecosystem.

Of course, there is still much that can be saved, but time is running out, and if Europe's oldest forests, untouched by people for thousands of years, are to survive the coming decade then drastic action is required before they are lost forever.

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