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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

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**Conservation of the Białowieża Forest
(Poland)**

Report by the Government

*Document prepared by
The Directorate of Culture and of Cultural and Natural Heritage*

The area surface of the Białowieśka Forest, in its part enclosed within the Polish state border, is 63.142 hectares, including 10.5023 hectares of the Białowieśki National Park (including 4.747 ha of strict reserve). By 1 January 2002, the "State Forest" Enterprise managed the area of 52.502 ha of the Forest, including 3.460 hectares occupied by the reserves and 2.357 by the protective zones of the refuges for animals covered by species protection. In the area managed by the "State Forest" Enterprise there are 1.198 trees - nature monuments and 744 trees anticipated to consider the nature monuments.

In their performance, the "State Forest" Enterprise act under the Act on Forests of 28 September 1991, further amended, as well as by guidance in the State Forestry Policy, as approved by the Government on 22 April 1997, hence by the documents which in accordance with the principle of sustainable development can reconcile the conflicting functions, i.e. the use and the protection of forest resources. The 10-Year Forest Management Plans are the documents to be approved by Minister of the Environment those indicate the forest management methods and scope. Such plans for three Forest Inspectorates within the "State Forest" Enterprise in the area of the Białowieśka Forest, once relevant specific comments were made by social bodies, were approved by Minister of the Environment on 10 June 2003.

An innovation in those plans is the assumption, that the acquisition (i.e. felling) of trees for exclusively commercial purpose shall be prohibited, because the naturalisation of natural processes and structures of the Forest is the principal goal of business management. That means, that the acquisition (i.e. felling) of trees shall be limited to an indispensable spectrum of the maintenance and protective measures, i.e. to redevelopment of tree-stands pursuant to the habitat needs and conditions.

Hence, in this context it was possible to repeal the Decision No. 48 on the prohibition to felling trees older than 100 years, that was made on 6 July 1998 by Director General of the "State Forest" Enterprise, and that has been questioned by the ecological movements. It has to be clarified here, that the repeal of this Decision was also possible in the past years, but it would be each time conditional under relevant consent granted by the Chief Nature Conservator. That administrative procedure was not only in almost entire non-compliance with existing legal status (trees owned by the "State Forest" Enterprise, when they are non-nature monuments, shall not be subject to the Nature Conservation Act, and therefore not subject to nature conservation services), but primarily, it endangered health of the spruce tree stands which are predominating in the Forest. Climate change characterises by frequent weather anomalies appearing in the Forest in the form of both the drought periods and the lowering of the groundwater level, and in consequence of these phenomena the spruces having shallow root system are weakened and subject to mortality in result of attacks by bark-beetles (spruce bark beetle !) invading in alarming tempo the weakened trees. Counteracting the mortality of spruce trees in commercial forest (which are the forests managed by the "State Forest" Enterprise in the Białowieśka Forest) consists in controlling spruce bark beetles by means of various methods, including the removal of affected trees before the feeding bark beetles have concluded their growth cycle. However, since the growth of bark beetles is not synchronous, the ban to fell old spruces without having relevant consent granted by the Chief Nature Conservator made hopeless the situation concerning obligatory control of bark beetles in forests managed by the "State Forest" Enterprise.

It does not result from the contents of the Forest Management Plans, that Decision No. 48 is repealed, but in preamble of these Plans there a provision is included, that in no case will the more than 100-year trees - oaks, ash-trees, maples and elms - be subject to felling. That means, that the forestry services of the Forest will feel free in relation to controlling the spruce bark beetle in spruce tree stands, and as far as the redevelopment of spruce, aspen and birch tree stands is concerned, that consists in rational exposure of the areas and leads to natural renewal of and natural growth processes in tree stands. The commercial measures are aimed at restoration of original species composition in the Forest. The plans limit the acquisition of wood for commercial purpose to an impassable level of 145.7 thousand m³ *per annum*, that in relation to standing resources of wood in the Forest is the rather small acquisition and is much more lower than the average accepted level of that in commercial forests. For example, in the period of 1970-1990 (hence prior to Decision No. 23 which was made on 9 November by Minister of the Environmental Protection Natural Resources and Forestry on the principles for pro-ecological direction for the Forest management), 200-220 thousand m³ was acquired in the Forest *per annum*, and such mass could be also acquired nowadays without prejudice to commercial persistence

of this site. However, it was assumed, that such a level could endanger the ecosystem persistence of the Forest, and that forms the superior objective in the Forest Management Plans for the Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka Forest Inspectorates.

At the same time, in order to cover with legal protection the tree stands which retained their natural character, the Minister of the Environment, by means of a relevant Regulation, has recognised as nature reserve about 8.6 thousand hectares of the present commercial forests. Hence, the total area of the reserves in the forest inspectorates managed in the Forest by the "State Forest" Enterprise grew from the previous 3.460 hectares up to 12 thousand hectares nowadays, that was taken into account in the currently mandatory Forest Management Plans.

Moreover, in the Forest Management Plans, about 3.6 thousand hectares forests consisting the protective zone of the national park and about 2.8 thousand hectares forests similar to natural ones were taken into account, those have been accounted for "special management" and were in practice excluded from felling use. The Management of both the Ministry of the Environment and the "State Forest" Enterprise take a full-range use of the guidance and comments being moved by the non-governmental organisations, including ecological movements and groups acting in favour of the protection of the Białowieska Forest. Understanding emotional nature of those comments, we note, that their Authors do not bear any responsibility for any possible effects of taking into account the proposals moved therein, while the forestry services managing the Forest must bear such effects in case, when their activity would derived from mandatory legal provisions, including those maintenance and protective measures as included in approved Forest Management Plans, and when such situation would lead to losses in forest substance. So, we consider that the comments published in the national and international arena on reputed current danger to the Białowieska Forest, that seemingly results from commercial activity, misleads the public opinion. The protective rigours adopted for these forests are similar to, and in some cases yet more stringent than those applied in the forests of the national parks in Poland. We only regret, that the more protective activities in the Białowieska Forest are undertaken by the "State Forest" Enterprise on their own or Ministerial initiative, or the public initiative (that was clearly visible in 1975, 1994, 1998 and nowadays), the more criticisms and tumult is raised by the non-governmental groups of interest, who take their opportunities to demand granting the status of the national park to the whole Forest. That is, however, quite different legal and organisational and financial issue which is seriously appreciated by the Minister of the Environment.