

## Carpathian Convention COP7

### Stakeholders' Consultation Report

11 October 2023, 13.30 - 15.00 CET, Serbian Palace, Hall of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, Serbia

#### Overall aim and purpose:

The consultation explored ecological connectivity in the Carpathians, emphasizing its importance at the policy-science interface and finding mechanisms for cross-sectoral collaboration in the future necessary for its implementation.

The purpose of the engagement was to inform the Parties to the Carpathian Convention about the goals of NaturaConnect and its anticipated tools and identify the key mechanisms on how further collaboration and information exchange could be ensured.

#### Outline of the consultation:

The session took about 1.5 hours and was separated into an introductory part, presented by Christian Remus Papp (WWF Romania), giving a general introduction to ecological connectivity and why it is important for the Carpathians, followed by an address by Harald Egerer, Head of the UNEP Vienna Programme Office and the Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention, about the role of ecological connectivity in the governance mechanisms of the Carpathian Convention highlighting the Convention be a great platform for collaboration.

Afterwards, we split into four breakout groups each composed of about 10 attendees plus one moderator per breakout group. Each breakout group had about 20 minutes to discuss and answer two key questions:

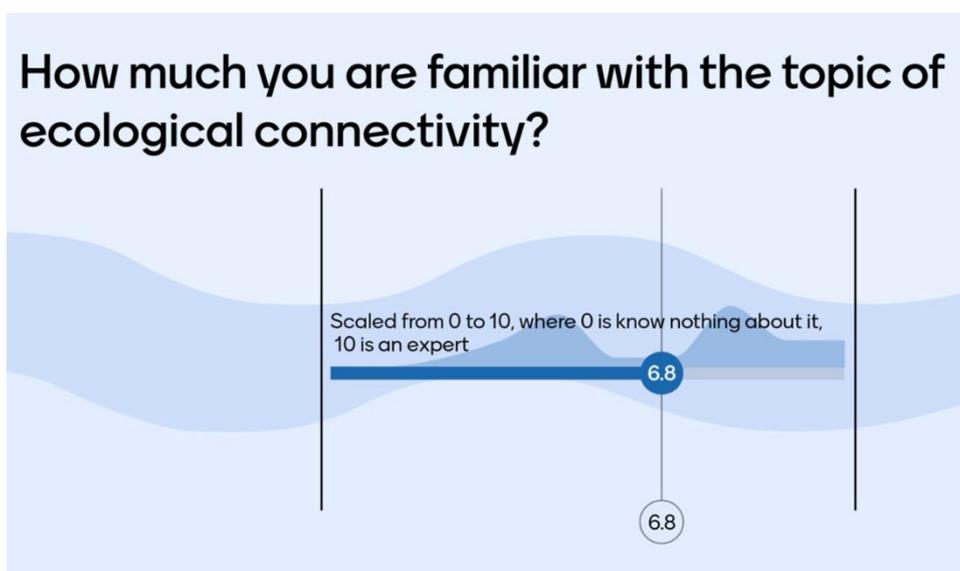
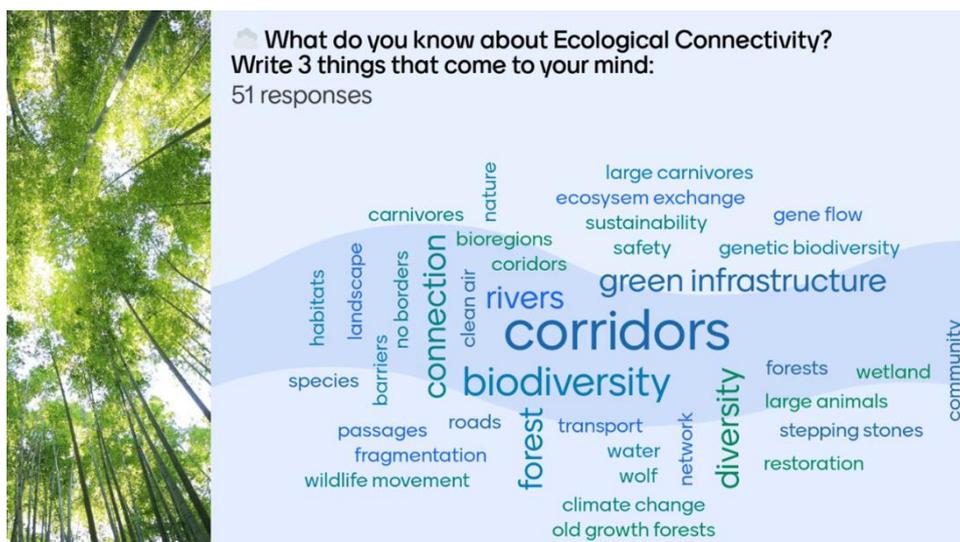
- What are the needs of the Parties to the Carpathian Convention to foster the development of a functional ecological network in the regional context?
- How can we use the Carpathian Convention cooperation mechanisms such as working groups to contribute to filling in the gaps?

Following the 20 minutes discussion, the outcomes from each group were summarized by each moderator under the coordination by Hildegard Meyer.

After the breakout group session, we had a panel discussion with Martin Jung (International Institute of Applied System Analysis, IIASA), Hildegard Meyer and Andreas Beckmann (WWF Central and Eastern Europe) from the group of observers to the Convention moderated by Mila Sirychenko, WWF-CEE. All three touched upon the topic on how their organisations/projects can support the Convention strengthening their work on ecological connectivity.

#### Introductory part:

**Hildegard Meyer**, WWF-CEE opened the Consultation with two questions on Mentimeter.



**Cristian-Remus Papp**, WWF Romania, introduced the audience to the topic of ecological connectivity, starting with its definition that “ecological connectivity is the unimpeded movement of species and the flow of natural processes that sustain life on Earth” ([Hilty et al. 2020](#)). Christian expanded on the elements of ecological connectivity such as sustainable use area, buffer and restoration area, and other elements. He pointed out known threats preventing ecological connectivity, such as the fragmentation of habitats in the Carpathians as a result of transport infrastructure development and land-use change, and also touched upon the topic of climate change. He illustrated the many often diverging interests in how landscapes are utilized and the need for a concerted perspective. Furthermore, he highlighted new spatial maps displaying the Carpathian ecological network based on a harmonized [methodology](#) developed during the Interreg ConnectGREEN project. Further work is needed to integrate this network in plans of other sectors and across borders to safeguard the rich biodiversity in the Carpathians.

See presentation - [SH-Consultation-COP7-slides-fin.pdf \(carpathianconvention.org\)](#)

**Harald Egerer**, Head of the Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention, continued by elaborating on the importance of ecological corridors for the Carpathian Convention. It is a particular challenge to maintain ecological connectivity in mountain areas. Valleys are critical in connecting landscape elements for nature. They are also places where economic development is taking place. In the Carpathians, we have larger semi-natural landscapes left than in other parts of Europe. Ecological connectivity has remained in better shape and biodiversity is higher than in other parts of Europe. This is an opportunity AND a responsibility to avoid impact on connectivity when developing the region, at the national level but also at the regional level. We must have connectivity across the whole mountain range in mind. Various EU past and ongoing projects (TRANSGREEN, ConnectGREEN, SaveGREEN, Centralparks; now LECA and NaturaConnect) have and continue to develop tools and strategies of particular relevance to the Parties to the Carpathian Convention.

The Carpathian Convention also works closely with other conventions, such as with the Alpine Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the Ramsar Convention, and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) to maximize the efforts of the Convention. COP6 recognized the Carpathian Convention as the regional mechanism for implementing the CBD and the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) in the Carpathians. Based on the declaration provisions, the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties is about to adopt the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework (CBF) as a vital instrument translating global goals and targets into transformative actions at the regional level.

The new CBF can further strengthen the work of the Convention to mainstream biodiversity and connectivity issues into other sectoral fields and working groups of the Convention and enhance a cross-sectorial exchange among working groups of the Carpathian Convention.

## Summarized results of the breakout groups

### ***Question 1: What are the needs of the Parties to the Carpathian Convention to foster the development of a functional ecological network in the regional context?***

Among key aspects discussed in the breakout groups, participants were particularly keen in highlighting the key role of social acceptance by local communities and councils of any connectivity measure such as ecological corridors. There was a clear need for more effective legislation and capacity building among the Parties of the Carpathian Convention, national authorities and local municipalities on the topic of ecological connectivity.

Furthermore, connectivity was widely perceived as requiring species-specific planning instruments and measures, as well as having to consider different land-use practices and cross-realm interactions. Ecological connectivity should incorporate aspects of green, blue and "air" (white?) infrastructure and connectivity, and uncertainties of identified corridors and options for ecological connectivity identified and communicated. Any planning should ideally be conducted in regions that are similar or homogenous in terms of their governance structures, such as bioregions or connected watersheds.

Ecological connectivity critically needs to take account of different climate change related vulnerabilities of species and habitats, as well as identifying options to abate key threats such as road-induced fragmentation or riverine barriers such as hydropower. Coordinated efforts for integrated and participatory land-use planning – considering also transhumance as a factor - would be necessary to efficiently implement ecological connectivity across sectors and realms. The stakeholders should tend to create stronger alignments between countries, cultures, and professions to boost the effect of the cooperation. For example, planning for

ecological connectivity in certain land uses such as forestry requires different processes and instruments than for watersheds and riverine systems. The available data for decision making in this context is perceived as insufficient and often not publicly available. Efforts on data sharing and further digitalisation of existing land-use plans could mitigate this issue.

Importantly, it was highlighted that there needs to be feedback and quality control mechanisms implemented in any prioritization exercise to evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of such work against existing baselines [assumption: baseline equating a monitoring and ground-truthing baseline]. Stakeholders also raised the issue of clearly identifying affected stakeholders and to align language and terminology with them, across countries, professions, and sectors. Creating clearer recommendations for the policy makers and a stronger peer pressure should put parties into a more active position. Funding was highlighted as a key barrier to such efforts, also among grass roots NGO working on preventing further urbanisation. The enhancement of Interreg Programmes and Public Private Partnerships could play a key role in identifying novel funding opportunities.

Overall, there was a desire for enhanced policy coordination between EU and non-EU member states as well as further engagement with academic institutions and NGOs. Not only high-level and top-down stakeholder engagement but also bottom-up stakeholder engagements should be part of the discussion towards establishing a working and implementable ecological network. A lack of information and communication on available tools and mechanisms was widely perceived and would help to enhance ecological connectivity planning in the Carpathians, as well as creating more possibilities for education training facilitation support. One possibility could be to establish further binding decisions and collaboration agreements on that topic at the next COP8 of the Carpathian Convention.

***Question 2: How can we use the Carpathian Convention cooperation mechanisms such as working groups to contribute to filling in the gaps?***

It was repeatedly emphasized that NaturaConnect and other past and ongoing projects could play an important role in prioritizing new areas for the Trans-European Nature Network in the Carpathians. The working groups of the Carpathian Convention could facilitate further cooperation between sectors, support funding applications and allow cross-sectoral project exchanges, e.g., joint working group meetings. Knowledge gains should feedback into the relevant channels to enable better implementation on the ground. In this respect, the Carpathian Countries Integrated Biodiversity Information System (CCIBIS) online platform could be advertised and supplemented with more information and data, also to promote best practice technical standards considering also the new results and guidelines from NaturaConnect. More organized fieldwork on the ground and for local stakeholders would be appreciated.

For establishing a functional ecological network, the Carpathian Convention cooperation mechanism should be further expanded through collaborations with other mountain regions (e.g., Alps, Dinaric Arc) and multi-governmental and international platforms such as ICPDR, IPBES, CBD and others. Education and training support could be facilitated through the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) instruments. Capacity building and a lack of long-term (financial) support to enable a coalition of actors to tackle the challenges behind establishing an ecological network was generally perceived as a barrier towards further implementation. In Slovakia, there are attempts to include ecological corridors in the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) strategic plans including the establishment of flower stripes between agricultural fields and the financing thereof.

Rather than establishing new working groups, there was generally more a desire to embed ecological connectivity into existing working group, round table discussions also with

businesses and further bottom-up and sectoral engagements. Further collaboration on allowing public participation in this process would help the implementation of future ecological corridors. Working groups should collaborate with observers of the Convention to better align messages and outcomes addressed to policy makers. At the national level, more emphasis needs to be placed on how law enforcement mechanisms could be strengthened. Those involved in the decision-making processes could further exchange best practices including what works (for example from evidence gathered through field work and local studies) and conferences and workshops that increase cooperation and networking opportunities.

In terms of existing gaps, clear preferences were raised to also consider climate adaptation in forests or valuation of biodiversity inclusive ecological corridors and the contributions it provides to the wellbeing of people. Working groups should consider also other pressures such as invasive alien species in the prioritization of effective management actions.

### Panel discussion:

Mila Sirychenko, WWF-CEE, introduced the three speakers and asked for their interventions on how their organisations/projects can foster work on ecological connectivity. Martin Jung from the International Institute of Applied System Analysis (IIASA) raised the topic of regional planning and the tools NaturaConnect can provide in support of the implementation of the targets of the EU Biodiversity Strategy as well as those of the Convention for Biodiversity. Hildegard Meyer, WWF-CEE, spoke about the approaches NaturaConnect is working on to build capacity for connectivity conservation. Andreas Beckmann, WWF-CEE, expanded on the WWF-CEE holistic approach to enhancing ecological connectivity in the region that is supported by the WWF International Wildlife Connect Initiative. Later, Martin Jung and Andreas Beckmann talked on how it is possible to effectively balance the conservation of natural ecosystems and biodiversity with the regional socio-economic development goals. The question from the audience was asked with regards to NaturaConnect and whether it integrates only corridors or NaturaConnect considers ecological connectivity in a broader sense, including genetic connectivity, future climate change, and other aspects. The panellist Martin Jung answered it, saying that NaturaConnect does consider ecological connectivity in a broader sense.

### Conclusion and next steps:

Overall, there was a perception that existing mechanisms and information exchanges within the Carpathian Convention could be strengthened to guide the implementation of a functional and truly connected ecological network. This could include improving communication of activities and results from bottom-up and top-down and awareness raising at all levels.

Many of these findings are already anchored in the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework (CBF). However, details on where and how to implement them are not outlined. Projects such as NaturaConnect could support the Carpathian Convention by identifying potential areas and actions for implementing the key goals of the CBF across sectors and realms. To that aim, since the Danube-Carpathian region is one of the six NaturaConnect case studies, WWF-CEE together with IIASA and the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences will engage with the respective working groups of the Convention and task forces of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) in the upcoming years.