

WHAT WE TREASURE MOST

Wherein lies the essence of the two-year dispute over the management and protection of the commercial forest stands in the Białowieża Primeval Forest?



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Starting from the reign of King Władysław II Jagiełło, in other words from the beginning of the 15th century, the land of the Białowieża Primeval Forest – which back then covered a much larger area – long remained the property of the Polish king. As the monarch's hunting grounds, it was not used for timber harvesting or for producing forest goods, apart from small amounts to meet local needs. After Poland was partitioned by its neighboring powers, the Białowieża Forest became part of the Russian Empire. In 1888, it became the private property of the Romanov family of tsars. In 1843, the Forest was first mapped out on a comprehensive scale, and the network of roads and forest grid lines was established. After Poland regained its independence in 1918, the whole of the Białowieża Forest was administered by the Polish State Forests. In 1945, it was cut in two by the new border with the Soviet Union (now Belarus). The Polish part of the Forest currently comprises the Białowieża National Park, which covers an area of 10,700 ha and operates under the Nature Conservation Act of 2004, plus remaining areas administered by the Polish State Forests – these are divided into three forest districts (Białowieża, Browsk, and Hajnówka), which cover a total area of 52,700 ha and pursue sustainable forest management in accordance with the Forestry Act of 1991.


Today's Białowieża Primeval Forest covers an area of over 150,000 ha, 58% of which lies in Belarusian territory. It is one of Europe's most treasured natural areas owing to the unique abundance of species and the presence of numerous old-growth tree

stands similar to natural forests in their characteristics. It is an exceptional and unique forest complex that creates ideal conditions for scientific study and observation.

The Białowieża Primeval Forest was described in numerous historical writings, ranging from the long descriptions of Juliusz Brincken (1827) and Aleksander Połujański (1854) to numerous interesting and original scientific treatments by Władysław Szafer, Jan Paczoski, Jan Karpiński, and other prominent scholars. A recent historical search of 1,042 writings brought to light new documents and new maps found in the archives in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Vilnius, Hrodna, Białystok, and Warsaw.

Thanks to this abundance of documents, we have become more familiar with the Forest's detailed history over the past 250 years, including the course and consequences of major fires, hurricanes, and storms as well as tree diseases and outbreaks of harmful insects, including mass outbreaks of the European spruce bark beetle. We have estimates of timber harvest volumes, including major logging efforts conducted in the Forest by the Germans during World War I. We know about the Century European Timber Corporation's outrageous activity in 1924-1934, about mass-scale logging during the Soviet occupation. We have detailed reports of timber harvesting since 1969.

The long dispute over what model of management is most beneficial for the Białowieża Forest from the perspective of all of its distinctive characteristics and functions has recently turned into a serious and sharp public conflict. In my opinion, the source of this conflict lies primarily in the long unresolved problem posed by the presence of as many as six different conservation regimes and forms in the Forest: a national park, 23 nature reserves with a total area of over 12,000 ha, the European ecological



network of protected areas “Natura 2000,” an MAB International Biosphere Reserve, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which covers the whole of the forest. In addition there are protected landscape areas and the State Forests’ promotional forest complexes, not to mention the significant presence of protected species of animals, plants, and fungi. A certain hope for the resolution of the conflict is offered by the World Heritage Site Management Plan that is currently being drafted. The plan will involve the expansion of the list of sites, extended criteria for these sites, and the enlargement of the area covered.

The reasons behind the dispute also include the conflicting interests of numerous groups that are active in the Forest and its buffer zone. It is difficult to reconcile the demands of forest management, the expectations of local communities and local governments of the six communes in the Forest, the interests of tour operators, hotels and restaurants, and the views of environmentalists. The region has a problem with a lack of jobs, young people are leaving the region, and an expansion of the national park will require the consent of local inhabitants and local governments. Environmental protection organizations seem to forget about this aspect, and they have failed to propose a concrete solution. Thirdly, scientific knowledge in the field of forest ecology and nature conservation alone offers no unambiguous guidelines. Should we prioritize the natural character of the ecosystem or rich biological diversity? The diversity of the age and structure of tree stands or maybe efforts to achieve a dynamic equilibrium? Should we protect especially valuable ecosystems passively, by making sure that ecological processes run their course without interruption, or actively, such as by reducing bark beetle outbreaks through the removal of deadwood and the cutting of the infested spruce trees?

What we are witnessing now in the area is the largest bark beetle outbreak since the end of World War II. According to current figures, the spruce tree stands that died in the Białowieża Forest in the years 2012–2017 cover a total area of around 8,000 ha, and the volume of deadwood is 1.5 million m³. The volume of the trees that have been removed so far is less than 250,000 m³, which means only 17%. There is a fundamental difference of opinion between the forest service, which is legally and financially responsible for the damage caused by the outbreaks, and environmentalists, who bear no such responsibility.

The dispute over the proper management and protection of the commercial forest stands in the Białowieża Primeval Forest, which has generated a great deal of media attention, is a political discussion and is accompanied by strong emotions. For the time being, there is no visible willingness to hold negotiations and reach a compromise, let alone work together. The Forest’s nature-related problems are often discussed by politicians or artists and celebrities, who have no relevant qualifications. Since the eruption of the dispute over the Białowieża Forest, the Polish Government has failed to work out a consistent and effective way to resolve the conflict. Likewise, there has been no public discussion regarding the proper long-term vision for the conservation of the Białowieża Primeval Forest as a world heritage site. It appears, however, that in order to secure the permanent and sustainable development of the Forest and the whole of the region, we will need both passive and active methods of protecting forest ecosystems. ■

This article presents the first part of Prof. Jan Holeksa’s lecture delivered at the meeting of the Academy’s Division II – Biological and Agricultural Sciences on 9 November 2017.