

2. Europe's Yellowstone? An analysis of the social impacts of forest conservation in Romania

Lead researchers: Irina Velicu and Marcus Erridge (CES)

Supporting researchers: Clara Bourgin (Friends of the Earth Europe), Ajda Pistotnik (Policy Lab), George Iordachescu (Wageningen University), Romana Puiulet (RISE project), Ioana Savin Bursan (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu - ULBS)



A cabin in the Făgăraș mountains, part of the Southern Carpathians. Photograph: Jack Wolfskin.

Summary

The case study targets conservation and biodiversity, the role of national parks and ecotourism, alongside the loss of cultural heritage, husbandry and the criminalisation of local logging and other traditional forms of self-sufficient living in the Carpathia Mountains, Romania. It focuses on the balance between meeting renewal energy targets, environmental protection and local communities' interests, needs and heritage.

Key policies include the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) (1976), NATURA 2000 Special Protection Areas (1992), EU Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan (FLEGT) (2003), and at the national level, Romania's Land Restitution Law 18/1991, New Forest Codes (2008, 2015, 2024) and Green Certificate reduction scheme (2014-2024).

Drawing from the GreenPaths analytical framework, the social impacts the case investigates include *injustice and inequality* (redistribution of costs and benefits, recognition and participation), *loss and damage* (from biodiversity and cultural heritage, to health,

dignity and wellbeing), recovery/resilience/restoration, governance/policies and labour. GreenPaths project-level concepts include *sustainable growth*, at the sectoral level, *renewables* and at the case-specific level, *green/landgrabbing*.

The virgin forests of the proposed wilderness reserve are an important biodiversity site and home to protected species, such as wolves, bears, lynx and beavers. Recent investment in eco-tourism, with the high profile publicity about the potential Romania's Yellowstone by Conservation Carpathia Foundation (CFF) the ultimate aim. However, small family farms and forests are being lost and traditional livelihoods and cultural heritage are at threat due to the expansion of ecotourism, the criminalisation of logging, precocity and rural depopulation. In a climate of land-grabbing and dispossession, this case study explores vulnerability and (in)angible losses.

Key data points

- 12.5% of Romania's population are unable to keep their homes adequately warm (EU-SILC/JRC, 2023)
- Romania's risk of poverty or social exclusion in rural areas is 41.7%, compared with 24.0% towns and suburbs and 14.3% in cities (Eurostat, 2024)
- 18.0% of the population work in agriculture (ILO, 2023).

