

Dear Prime Minister, Dear President, Dear Minister of Environment,

We are highly concerned about the signals which come from the public media in Belgium and from abroad, including the report formulated after the conference on “Białowieża Forests – myths, facts and the future”, organized by the Polish Ministry of Environment in March 2016, and published on the Ministry website, informing about a substantial increase in the logging of the Białowieża Forest due to bark beetle outbreak.

As representatives of the scientific community, having a large and excepted expertise in botany, plant ecology, forest history and forest ecology, we strongly disagree with the plans of the increased timber harvesting in the area of old forests managed and governed by the Polish State Forests in Białowieża Forest District. The Białowieża Forest is protected by international law, as a part of the European Nature 2000 network. Furthermore, it was also designated as the UNESCO World Heritage Site. Inclusion of these unique forests in the list of the UNESCO World Heritage was based on two criteria (IX and X). In other words Białowieża Forest is an "outstanding example representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of plant and animal ecosystems and communities", "containing the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation").


According to best scientific knowledge on forest ecology and forest management we argue that the implementation of the silvicultural practices, aimed to reforest the cleared parts, currently occupied by dead trees, will inevitably destroy the potential of these sites to recover naturally after the outbreak and will inhibit the natural processes of forest dynamics at least for many years. Reforestation and its disturbance will lead to the conversion of this unique forest into typical plantation forest whereas, according to the international law Poland is obliged to protect the natural processes, habitats and species that make the Białowieża Forest so unique and world famous. The conservation of this Forest should therefore be a priority according to the rules which Poland accepted once applying to designate Białowieża Forest as the object protected by the international conventions. A lot of scientists and people interested in nature and forests have visited regularly the Białowieża Forest, which definitely generated a continuous economic return to the region and this is ongoing for many years. Conducting spruce felling, called by the Ministry the ‘sanitary cuttings’, in over one-hundred years old stands, including the sites of the swamp and riparian forests, is a drastic example of breaking such rules. It will radically change the Forest and will also impact the economic returns from tourism to the Forest.

As environmental scientists we are deeply astonished to read on the website of the Polish Ministry of Environment that Białowieża Forest is regarded by the Ministry as “the cultural heritage of the local population” or that “Białowieża Forest is the work of human hands”. We understand that its primeval character is in many parts questionable – people have always been around and had some influence, but naming it a cultural heritage is clearly exaggerated. The Forest is generally regarded as the best preserved example of forests which once covered the European lowlands. Each student of biological and forestry sciences is familiar with that fact, whereas we sadly read the information about its predominant cultural value. This statement strongly contrasts with the data from the internationally

published scientific papers. Their authors emphasize the long and continuous forest history of these areas, since the end of ice age, and a relatively low human impact on the Białowieża Forest, when compared with other European forests.

The implementation of cuttings in such worldwide famous and precious site as the Białowieża Forest, despite the regulations guaranteed by the international nature protection law and despite the opinion of many highly regarded scientific communities of forest ecologists and environmentalists is a very alarming and worrying sign for the international community. It will generate an economic return for a short period, but it will severely jeopardize the continuous return from nature interested tourism. We therefore cannot believe that our concerns, and the many that have been expressed already, will not be taken into account; they should result in reconsideration of the current plans of the Ministry of Environment, and should lead to abandonment of the plans of logging.

Sincerely yours

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