

## How to cut EU virgin forests

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I am for fifteen years working in forestry, mostly in Romania, including here five years of study for diploma – where I was first in my batch with average grade 9,79 from maximum 10 – and three years and a half for my PhD. Currently I work in forest research and during all my professional life I involved myself in professional's organizations. One of my best achievements is that I have seen forests and forestry all over Europe.



### The frame

There is no place in The European Union where the destruction of the last virgin forests and wilderness takes place, at such high rate and extension, as it is happening in Romania right now. In 2004 the official area covered by virgin forests was more than 400 000 ha. In 2017 the area has decreased to less than 200 000 ha, with no official comprehensive and reliable record. The reasons for this dramatic situation are diverse, ranging from law-enforcement and economical to socio-historical ones.

### Conservation Cuttings!

Virgin forests in Romania legally are “strictly protected”, as in Picture 1. But “strict protection” imply “Conservation Cuttings” – which consist in cutting usually 15% of the standing volume every ten years, but in “well documented” cases up to 100%, virtually a clear cut. These “Conservation Cuttings” are pretending to maintain the perpetual forest ecosystem functionality, even in the case of virgin forests! Quite arrogant.

When we think at a 15% “conservation cutting” we should consider that the timber can be harvested in just one place, by a clear-cut, which is baptized “conservation cutting”. In picture 2 is shown how a Conservation Cutting is done in what used to be a virgin forest. Practically all the big trees are cut down.

### Salvage cuttings

These, ironically named, “conservation cuttings” are completed by the EU-spread “salvage cuttings” which are also allowed by law in virgin forests, which are under “strict protection”. No need to say that “salvage cuttings” are aimed to save timber and immediate money, not ecosystem functionality and for

sure not the wilderness of the landscape. Picture 3, depicts the result of applying conservation and salvage cuttings on more than 300 ha area in a Carpathian forest, classified as protection forest with anti-erosional and river protection functions. You can imagine what erosions and flush-floods are taking place there now!

### The case study of Săliște, Sibiu county.

In this forest administration service, more than 60% of the annual timber harvest was for the period 2004-2014 coming from salvation and conservation cuttings, in some years reaching more than 80%!

The Forest Guard inspector, controlling the cuttings, was already criminal-convicted for illegal logging done by one of his logging firms. Despite the functioning law of the Forest Guard which bans criminal-convicted persons to work for the institution, he was not fired and continued to work for the Forest Guard three more years, until a local NGO made a complain.

The cutting approved by the criminal-convicted inspector and the cuttings done the forests, including virgin forests, were never controlled after he was fired.

For the period 2004-2014, more than 390 000 cubic meters of timber, have been illegally cut from 8000 ha public forests. This theft took place with the support of the local authorities and Forest Guard inspectors.

In late 2014 a forest engineer made complaints to the ministry, prosecutor office, and police. Three investigations were started but for more than two years now no one was find guilty for the more than 6 million EURO timber theft that took place there, despite the overwhelming evidence!

The only employee that is not working in that administration office any longer is the forest engineer who made the complaints.

An example of a legal “conservation cutting”, done in late 2016 in the municipal forest of Săliște, in Sibiu county, in forests which should protect against erosion, flush-floods, and other climatic hazards can be seen in picture 4.

### **The answer: Law enforcement and Management of forest-criminals**

Even with all the dysfunctionalities, the forest and wilderness destruction would not happen in such an alert pace if legislation would be enforced, by most of the Forest Administrations, Forest Guard and by the Prosecutors. But to enforce the forest law specialized prosecutors should exist, especially since in 2014 for instance 9 million cubic meters of timber were illegally logged in Romania with a value of more than 720 million Euros! Therefore, it is a serious reason for specialized prosecutors to exist, if there is political will.

A second option to stop this criminalization the forest-related sectors can be represented by a new legal approach stating that if a company or administrator is responsible for criminal activity in a forest-related sector they should be ban to continue to be active in the sector. This will make room for other potentially more honest actors to enter the arena and for sure will make the firms and private persons active in the forest related sectors more responsible than the current fines.

### **Why to protect virgin forests and wilderness?**

Nowadays in EU country of Romania there is no forest which cannot be cut, if influential enough entities or people have the interest to cut them. Such destruction of the last EU virgin forests and wilderness is highly unethical towards present and future generations, which are and will be deprived of reference model-ecosystems useful in an adaptive management of natural capital imposed by the current climate change.

The lack of efficient actions to protect these last virgin forests is disrespecting the most essential precautionary principle.

In this moment in history and in this place of EU, protecting wilderness and virgin forests is protecting our very basic model of human dignity on which free societies are based on, because human dignity and existence is dependent on nature ecosystems and wilderness, for essential needs like oxygen. This dependence is likely to increase in the future because of climate change.



Picture 1. Tree marked to be cut in a virgin forest in Vâlcea County. EU, Romania, November, 2016



Picture 2. A mixed, previously virgin, forest stand on Arpaşu Valey, in Făgăraş Mountains where conservation cuttings are applied. EU, Romania, May 2016



Picture 3. Conservation cuttings and salvation cuttings in Alba County. EU, Romania, May, 2016



Picture 4. Conservation cutting in a young beech protection forest at Săliște, Sibiu county. The forest should protect the town which is below. EU. Romania, November 2016