

Rangers in Tatra National Park (Slovakia)

The CMA has raised funds to help overseas delegates attend the IRF conference in Stirling. Here one of the sponsored delegates - **Juraj Švajda** - tells us about the management of Tatra National Park in Slovakia.

In recent years nature protection has undergone many changes in Slovakia. The national system of nature and landscape protection consists of 9 National Parks, 14 Protected Landscape Areas and 1073 small-scale protected areas – National Nature Reserves, Natural Reserves, National Nature Monuments, Nature Monuments and Protected Distribution Ranges. Their total area is 1.14 million hectares, 23% of the land area of Slovakia. There are five levels of landscape and nature protection, with restrictions proportionate to the level of designation. National Parks get the third level of protection, nature reserves receive the fourth and fifth level.

The Tatra Mountains are the highest part of the Carpathians, one of the highest mountain ranges in Europe, stretching in a large bow-shape from the Czech Republic in the west to Romania in the southeast. Not many other European mountain ranges are still home to the whole range of large European predators such as bear, lynx, wild cat, marten, wolf and fox. Here you can still find some of the last remaining remnants of virgin mountain forest in Europe. The Tatra Mountains are a true treasure of the Carpathians; not only the highest and most beautiful part of the whole mountain range, but the most visited too. The mountains rise steeply from the surrounding landscape with wide basins, which not so long ago were covered by dense forests. Standing on the peak of Mt. Kriván on a clear day, you can see from one end of the Tatras to the other. The Tatra National Park is a unique place where several significant ecological communities are found together. The number of recorded plant species alone exceeds 1,300, making the National Park an important centre of European and world biodiversity. For flora and fauna, the Tatra Mountains are a border-zone. A characteristic feature of the Tatras is the so-called vegetational gradation; the species composition changes with increasing elevation and the vegetation can be divided in quite distinct vegetation zones.

Visitors to the Tatras realised the areas uniqueness long ago. It was here that the first European cross-border national park was founded. In 1948 the Tatra National Park (Tatransky Narodny Park) was formed on the Slovak side, and in 1954 the Tatra National Park (Tatranski Park Narodowy) joined it on the Polish side. UNESCO has acknowledged the uniqueness of the Tatras and accepted them into the family of international biosphere reserves in 1993. As a result the Tatra National Parks have become a model of international cooperation in the field of environmental protection.

The Tatra National Park serves people by fulfilling a variety of functions. Importantly the park is an irreplaceable natural laboratory for investigating natural

phenomena, including the anthropogenic impact on natural components. For about 3 million visitors a year the Tatra National Park represents a holiday and health resort, a place for sports and hiking. Visitors who are sympathetic towards the natural environment utilize a 600 km path network, respect the native plants and animals of the region, and adhere to the regulations necessary to protect and preserve the rarities of the region. The alpine conditions of the Tatra region require visitors to choose paths carefully and be well prepared with suitable equipment.

The high number of visitors often causes disturbance to the surrounding natural environment, such as erosion, noise and disturbance to wildlife, with a resulting decrease in numbers of chamois and marmots for example. To reduce these impacts the Tatra National Park Administration has developed a Visitors Charter which visitors are required to follow. Detailed regulations for conducting hiking, climbing, paragliding, skiing and other activities in the park are available from the Park's Information Centre or Administration Offices.

The biggest challenges facing the park are connected with strong pressure for economic exploitation (forestry, hunting, building, tourism). This was the reason why the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) visited the National Park in April 2005. They gave advice to the state authorities and other interested parties on the management measures required to maintain the parks IUCN management category II status. Experts concluded that radical changes to the structure of decision making, management authority, planning and zonation were required to safeguard the high natural and cultural values of Tatra National Park.

The Ministry of Environment's organisation, the State Nature Conservancy of Slovak Republic, is responsible for nature protection in Slovakia. Protected areas also have their own administrative bodies. One possible future development could see these local administrative units executing state functions. Another development may result in State Nature Conservancy buying privately owned land within protected areas.

Currently a complex re-evaluation of the national system of protected areas is under way. Natura 2000 – the European network of protected sites – is now the priority. In the coming period it will be necessary to elaborate upon the concept of nature protection, to finish the re-evaluation of the national system of nature protection including zonation, and to implement the European system of protected areas (protected bird areas and areas of European importance). It will also be necessary to build the system of research and monitoring of protected species, to realize management plans within the Natura 2000 framework and to make more effective the cooperation between nature and landscape protection organisations and owners and users of the land in protected areas.

Tatra National Park (Slovakia) is 73,800 hectares (182,360 acres) with 30,703 hectares (75,867 acres) of protected zone. National Nature Reserves with the highest level of protection cover 51% of the territory. The proposed Natura 2000 network covers 86% of the National Park.

Although the Ministry of the Environment is formally responsible for establishing and managing protected areas, in reality the Forestry Division carries out management. The National Park Authority has only an advisory role on the management of land within the National Park. The National Park employs 38 people (including 15 rangers) in 3 offices, and has a very limited budget (3.3 mil Sk, 105,000 USD a year), which comes from central government.

The Slovak government has passed legislation to empower rangers within Tatra National Park with Nature Guard powers. Rangers have similar authority to the police and can restrict the freedom of people engaged in criminal activity, demand proof of identity, stop vehicles and impose cash penalties. Rangers carry an official badge and can produce an official card on demand. The uniform includes a Tatra National Park patch with insignia on shirtsleeves.

Great significance is attached to the role of Ranger, and only those applicants who fulfil difficult criteria are selected for the job. Rangers – as representatives of National Park Administration – must use their ability to communicate to have influence within their territory. They play a very important role in co-operation with the local population, stakeholders and local government. Rangers are primarily engaged in practical protection of their territory. Their main tasks are - assuring observation of regulations, regulation of visitors, applying management measures for reserves and species, marking protected areas, providing information and education services to visitors, and co-ordinating approximately 90 Voluntary Rangers. Our objective is to create a picture of the ranger as someone who protects nature with the help of visitors and the local population, not against them. Ultimately the objectives and mission of the protected areas dictate the Ranger's function. We currently think that ranger numbers are insufficient. In deciding how many rangers are needed we must not only look at the area of protected territory, but also the natural conditions and carrying capacity of the territory for a range of human activities.

There is a risk of imbalance between the service delivery and clerical functions of the Ranger's job. Similarly a balance must be struck between the Ranger as a policeman on one hand, and a tutor and interpreter on the other. Personal development and establishing criteria to certify Rangers skills are important. This is where the International Ranger Federation – of which the Slovak Ranger Association is a member – plays a very important role. In the future this will help us meet the challenges of local stakeholder distrust, large areas to cover with insufficient communication, poor financial input and insufficient equipment.

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