

# Research needs for supporting better protection of Europe's wilderness

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## Wilderness momentum in Europe

More than 100 organisations from the NGO, government and tourism sectors submitted a Resolution of Wilderness Areas in November 2008. The intensive lobby activity led to the adoption of a Special Report on Wilderness by the European Parliament (EP) on February 3rd 2009. The Parliamentary vote (548 “yes” versus 19 “no”) proved the existence of huge public support towards the better protection of Europe's remaining wilderness areas.

This special report had various requests towards linking the tourism and research sectors with wilderness conservations. The most relevant were the followings:

- The EP called a study on the value and benefits of wilderness protection, which particularly addresses the sustainable nature tourism, among other issues of ecosystem services.
- In view of the well-documented damage which tourism has inflicted on a great deal of Europe's natural heritage, calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that tourism, even if focused on introducing visitors to the habitats and wildlife of a wilderness area, is handled with extreme care, making full use of experience gained inside and outside Europe on how to minimise its impact (European Parliament 2009).

This popular mandate allowed the European Commission to support the organisation of the 1st European wide conference on 'Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas' ([www.wildeurope.org](http://www.wildeurope.org)) in Prague on 28-29th May 2009. The conference resulted in an agenda for Europe's wilderness areas, which not only confirmed the increasing political interest in wilderness but also demonstrated an increasing interest in linking tourism related research with biodiversity consequences.

## Linking tourism and wilderness research

There is an urgent need to develop the linkage not only between the tourism and biodiversity related research, but also a link between conservation professionals and tourism research specialists. This link is needed to ensure the further investigation into the scientific rationale underpinning the linkage between wilderness conservation and the delivery of societal benefits in support of social programmes (Poseltvi 2009). Therefore, this paper suggests setting up a new network of research institutions and conservation organisation, (among them PAN Parks Foundation which focuses on protection of Europe's wilderness) which can apply for funding within the 7th framework programme of the European Commission.

## Introduction to PAN Parks

The concept of PAN Parks started in 1997. The idea was to increase management effectiveness of wilderness areas through using tourism as a tool to increase public support. The concept emerged into a new foundation which is currently managing a network of 11 protected areas across Europe. The PAN Parks Foundation always had a relatively wide range of connection with research institutions. Our innovative concept attracted the attention of researchers and students. The cooperation between Pan Parks Foundation (PPF) and the academic sector can be divided into three periods:

- 1997 – 2003: the researches were student-driven. There was no systematic approach in designing a research plan linked to PAN Parks.
- 2003 – 2006: setting up an informal network of academic institutions around PAN Park. We had a partnership with about 6 universities in the Netherlands, UK and Switzerland. There were still occasional researches based on the request of students

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- 2007 – 2008: PAN Parks had an employee coordinating the researches and developing a systematic research agenda.

### **Wilderness Think Tank**

PAN Parks Foundation set up a new organisational structure in mid 2008. That led to a new way of approaching the coordination of the researches. Our connection to the network of academic institution significantly weakened and much less research has been carried out since then. Our team suggests now setting up a 'Wilderness Think Tank', which can effectively play the role of the previous research network. Here comes the definition of a think tank: "*A think tank (also called a policy institute) is an organization, institute, corporation, or group that conducts research and engages in advocacy in areas such as social policy, political strategy, economy, science or technology issues, industrial or business policies, or military advice.*" (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). PPF calls not only scientists but also practitioners, policy makers and so on, to participate in this think tank, which would not only provide opportunities for wilderness related researches, but also lobby for improved wilderness conservation in Europe.

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