

State of conservation report of the Belarusian part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site "Bialowieza Forest"

**Name of World Heritage Property: "Bialowieza Forest"
(Poland/Belarus) (N33ter).**

1. Executive Summary of the report:

The state of conservation report of the transboundary World Heritage Site "Bialowieza Forest" (hereinafter – the Site) has been prepared in compliance with paragraph 13 of Decision 45 COM 7B.21 adopted at the extended 45th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee (10 - 25 September 2023, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia).

The report provides information on the implementation of Decision 45 COM 7B.21 by the Belarusian side.

The report contains information on the current status and conservation problems of the Site, identified by the Belarusian side, which may have an impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of the Site.

Special attention in the report is paid to the problem of the negative consequences of the barrier constructed by the Republic of Poland on the territory of the Site.

The document additionally provides an analysis of the territorial protection regime, information on forest management measures, invasive species control, and restoration of the hydrological regime of drained bogs on the territory of the Belarusian part of the Site.

2. Response to Decision 45 COM 7B.21 of the World Heritage Committee

Information in paragraphs 3, 8, 9, 10, 11 refers to the Polish side of the transboundary Site.

At the same time, the Belarusian side shares the utmost concern expressed by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in **paragraph 3** of Decision 45 COM 7B.21 regarding the negative impact of the border barrier constructed by the Republic of Poland along the Belarusian-Polish border, including on the territory of the Site (a detailed description of the problem is presented in Part 3 of this report).

On paragraph 4:

At present, the Belarusian side has no possibility to minimize in any manner the negative impact of the border barrier constructed by the Republic of Poland on the territory of the Site (a detailed description of the problem is presented in Part 3 of the report).

On paragraph 5:

The Belarusian side hereby confirms its utmost interest and previously expressed readiness to host a UNESCO World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive monitoring mission within the timeframe requested by the Centre and to provide full assistance in the fulfillment of the objectives set out in paragraph 5 of Decision 45 COM 7B.21.

On paragraph 6:

The Belarusian side informs that for the last 3 years (starting from 2021), all transboundary cooperation on the protection and management of the transboundary UNESCO World Heritage Site "Bialowieza Forest" has been terminated by the Polish side unilaterally and on its own initiative.

For example, in January 2022, pursuant to paragraph 12 of Decision 44 COM 7B.100 and in order to prepare a joint state of conservation report of the Site, the Belarusian side sent its part of the said report to the Ministry of Climate and Environment of the Republic of Poland. The Belarusian environmental authority did not receive any response from the Polish side.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus has not received any responses to repeated requests to provide information on the assessment of the impact of the barrier on the environment of the Site.

The proposal of the Belarusian side to hold bilateral consultations in accordance with Article 2.5 of the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (the Espoo Convention), sent in July 2022, also received no response from the Polish side.

In 2023 the Belarusian environmental authority received only one letter from the Ministry of Climate and Environment of the Republic of Poland, in which the Polish side expressed its opinion that there was no need to invite a UNESCO World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive monitoring mission of experts to the Site. The letter was submitted in response to the proposal of the Belarusian side to support the request to invite a reactive monitoring mission.

Thus, the attempts of the Belarusian side to continue a constructive dialogue for the conservation of the unique natural complex of Bialowieza Forest do not find support from the Polish side.

Consequently, at present, for reasons beyond the control of the Belarusian side, there is no opportunity to develop a Transboundary Integrated Management Plan of the Site.

At the same time, the need to develop a Transboundary Integrated Management Plan of the Site is reflected in the current Management Plan of the National Park "Belovezhskaya Pushcha" for 2022-2031 (paragraph 1.5.2 of the Management Plan of the National Park "Belovezhskaya Pushcha" "*Develop a transboundary Management Plan of the Transboundary World Heritage Site*").

On paragraph 7:

The Belarusian side informs that the Management Plan of the National Park "Belovezhskaya Pushcha" came into force in 2022 and is valid until 2031 inclusive.

In accordance with paragraph 1.2.7 of the Management Plan "*Adoption of a decision on the ban on wolf hunting on the territory of the UNESCO World Heritage Site in accordance with the established procedure*", a legal ban on wolf hunting on the territory of the Belarusian part of the Site is planned to be adopted in 2024.

On paragraph 12:

The performance of works on restoration of the natural flow of the Narevka river is stipulated by paragraph 1.1.2 of the Management Plan of the National Park "Belovezhskaya Pushcha": *"Develop and implement projects on restoration of the hydrological regime of disturbed small rivers and reservoirs, as well as regulation of the hydrological regime of artificial watercourses"*. The implementation period will be determined by the availability of financial resources required to carry out the work.

3. Other current conservation issues identified by State Party which may have an impact on the property's Outstanding Universal Value

In this paragraph, the Belarusian side provides the updated information on the main conservation issue of the Site – the border barrier constructed by the Republic of Poland and its negative impact on the ecosystems of Bialowieza Forest.

The Polish barrier has the following characteristics: the height is 5,5 m; the length within Belovezhskaya Pushcha is 55,9 km, including more than 43 km in the boundaries of the UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The negative impact can be divided into direct (simultaneous) and subsequent (long-term) impacts.

The direct (simultaneous) negative impact consists of:

1) fragmentation of forest complex and protected habitats, disruption of transboundary ecological connectivities;

2) cutting of the adjacent strip of relic forest on the Polish side of Bialowieza Forest;

Based on the analysis of available design data, photos of the construction process, satellite monitoring data, it can be stated that forest stands in the buffer zone up to 8-9 m were cut down. For the assessment of the scale of deforestation, the available materials from the Polish forest database were used. The felling volume was calculated based on the taxation characteristics within a 1 m wide strip by sampling all overlapping parts of forest stands. The analysis shows that about 2,62 ha of forest stands with the volume of stem wood of 723 m³ were cut down during the barrier construction.

Furthermore, according to various estimates, on average, 2 large trees were damaged for every 100 m of construction. Thus, at least 1100 trees were damaged in total on the construction site.

3) destruction of living ground cover during construction works.

It should be noted that Poland did not conduct an environmental impact assessment at the design stage of the barrier, at least such assessments were not provided to the Belarusian side.

Since a short period of time has passed after the construction of the barrier (as measured by the speed of natural processes), it is impossible to fully assess the extent of the damage caused. Taking into account the data on technical characteristics of the constructed structure, types and scope of works performed, it is possible to state the subsequent (long-term) negative consequences on natural complexes:

1) *blocking of the migration routes of animals and impoverishment of the gene pool of their populations;*

The border barrier is an obstacle to large mammal species: the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), elk (*Alces alces*), red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), European bison (*Bison bonasus*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), and European lynx (*Lynx lynx*).

The main negative impact on local populations is caused by fragmentation of their habitats by the impenetrable barrier structure, as well as by direct mortality (entanglement in barbed wire, etc.). The fragmentation of populations, in turn, led to the separation of the single population of these species living Belovezhskaya Pushcha and affected reproductive capacity and gene exchange, which is the basis for the functioning and survival of populations.

Such isolation has a particularly negative impact on small populations of species living on the territory of the Republic of Poland – elk, bison, wolf, lynx, and bear. Data on the number of these species in Belarus shows their growth both in the country as a whole and in Bialowieza Forest. It shows that the Eastern part of the populations of these species in Bialowieza Forest has an opportunity to contact and exchange individuals with populations on the territory of our country and within the habitat of these boreal species in general, which are often located on the southern border of the area of their distribution in Belarus. Mammal populations in the western part of Bialowieza Forest (on the territory of the Republic of Poland) are effectively cut off from other populations, which may lead to the risk of reducing their genetic diversity and increase their vulnerability.

With regard to bear and lynx this may also have consequences for the European region, because the barrier will prevent the natural reintroduction of these species into the territory, especially since the passage of the brown bear from Belarus to Poland has been documented for the first time in 100 years (Diserens et al., 2020).

In support of the above, a recent genetic study of the lynx (Lucena-Perez et al., 2020) shows that the lynx population in north-eastern Poland is one of the least variable populations in the entire range of the species, which makes it very vulnerable.

2) *violation of the hydrological regime due to road filling for the transportation of construction materials and the construction of structural elements of the barrier;*

3) *violation of natural processes near the floodplain areas of the rivers Narev, Gvozna, Narevka, Lesnaya Pravaya, etc., threatening to cause forest waterlogging;*

The large forest massif of Bialowieza Forest has historically developed in the conditions of a stable hydrological regime which is characterised by a rather high level of ground waters, intensive spring high water, stable summer-autumn and winter low-water periods. The waterlogging of the area adjacent to the border barrier constructed on the territory of Poland has already been developing in some places.

As a result of damming of the border strip, the groundwater level is expected to rise causing a high probability of stand destruction in the area of direct impact. According

to the calculations based on the data of digital relief model and forest management materials, the total area of potential waterlogging areas is 45,39 ha.

The total length of dams in the flood plains of the rivers is 6 360 m, including the flood plains of the following rivers: 370 m – Kolonka, 160 m – Narev, 400 – Gvozna, 300 – Narevka, 3700 m – Perevoloka (3 discontinuous sections), 1700 – Lesnaya Pravaya. The presence of such a developed system of dammed sections inevitably leads to the violation of the hydrological regime of rivers and adjacent forests and wetlands.

4) *emergence of new ways of penetration of invasive alien plants into natural ecosystems (Canadian goldenrod, small-flowered touch-me-not, etc.).*

In the Belarusian sector, in the 1 km zone along the barrier, there are 5 potential corridors for the introduction of invasive species into the territory of Belarus. The emergence of such areas is forecasted on the area of 1,64 thou ha.

In addition, the Belarusian side submits the following information:

the analysis of the territorial protection regime;

the information on forest management measures;

the information on the control of invasive species;

the information on the restoration of the hydrological regime of the drained bogs on the territory of the Belarusian part of the Site.

Thus, the territorial protection regime has remained unchanged and corresponds to the data displayed in the Nomination Dossier.

According to the Regulations of the National Park "Belovezhskaya Pushcha", the territory of the World Heritage Site is distributed by functional areas as follows: the protected area – 58 178 ha (70,7% of the territory of the World Heritage Site), the regulated area – 22 176 ha (26,9% of the territory of the World Heritage Site), the recreation area – 1 734 ha (2,1% of the territory of the World Heritage Site), the economic area – 2 152 ha (2,6% of the territory of the World Heritage Site).

The following restrictions on economic activity are imposed on the territory of the functional areas where the strict protection regime does not function: the outright ban on all types of felling – 8 496,6 ha (10,3% of the territory of the World Heritage Site); the ban on all types of felling, except for sanitary felling in case of stand death – 3 713,2 ha (4,5% of the territory of the World Heritage Site); the ban on all types of felling, except for measures aimed at the protection of rare plant species – 64,9 ha (0,1% of the territory of the World Heritage Site); the ban on all types of felling in the period from 1 March to 30 August – 1 995,4 ha (2,4% of the territory of the World Heritage Site).

Thus, the territory of the World Heritage Site where the legal ban on all types of felling has been adopted is 66 673,6 ha (81,0%) including the protected area and taking into account the areas where the ban on all types of felling has been adopted (except for sanitary felling in case of stand death) is 70 386,8 ha (85,5%).

Forest management measures on the territory of the World Heritage Site:

In 2023, felling was carried out on the Site for sanitary purposes, as well as for fire safety and to ensure the safety of tourist visits and vehicle movement: clearing of compartment lines, removal or lopping of dangerous trees. On the territory of areas 0, 1, and 2, all timber was left in place, and on the territory of area 3, all timber was removed. In total, 13,4 thou m³ of timber was felled on an area of 697,9 ha, 11,5 thou m³ of which was removed.

In 2023, 81 low fires were observed on the Site covering the area of 36,0 ha.

The spread of invasive plant species, primarily *Solidago canadensis*, continues to be a serious threat to the natural complexes of the Site. According to the inventory carried out in 2023, on the territory of the Belarusian part of the Site, the growth of Canadian goldenrod was observed on the area of 86,4 ha. The control of invasive species is carried out by mowing.

Data on the recreational load on the territory of the World Heritage Site: the number of visitors to the national park in 2023 is 520 thou, but most of them visited the Museum of Nature and demonstration open-air cages with animals, located in the protected area of the Site. During the year, 40 thou people visited the territory of the natural complexes of the Site within the existing tourist routes.

In 2023, works were carried out to restore the hydrological regime of the drained lowland bogs "Zubritsa – Galevo Boloto" in the southern part of the Site on the area of 560 ha. The purpose of the works was to restore the ecosystems of open lowland bogs transformed as a result of drainage reclamation of the area, as well as to stabilize the hydrological regime in the nearby forest complexes. These works were carried out as part of the implementation of paragraph 1.1.2 of the Management Plan "Develop and implement projects to restore disturbed (drained) ecological systems of bogs of the national park".

4. In conformity with Paragraph 172 of the *Operational Guidelines*, describe any potential major restorations, alterations, and/or new construction(s) intended within the property, the buffer zone(s) and/or corridors or other areas where such developments may affect the Outstanding Universal Value of the property, including authenticity and integrity.

Not planned

5. Public access to the state of conservation report

Provide public access.

6. Signature of the Authority.

Minister of Natural Resources
and Environmental Protection
of the Republic of Belarus

/signature/ Andrei Khudyk