Trans-European Forest Corridor – a concept for preserving Europe's natural heritage and wilderness restoration

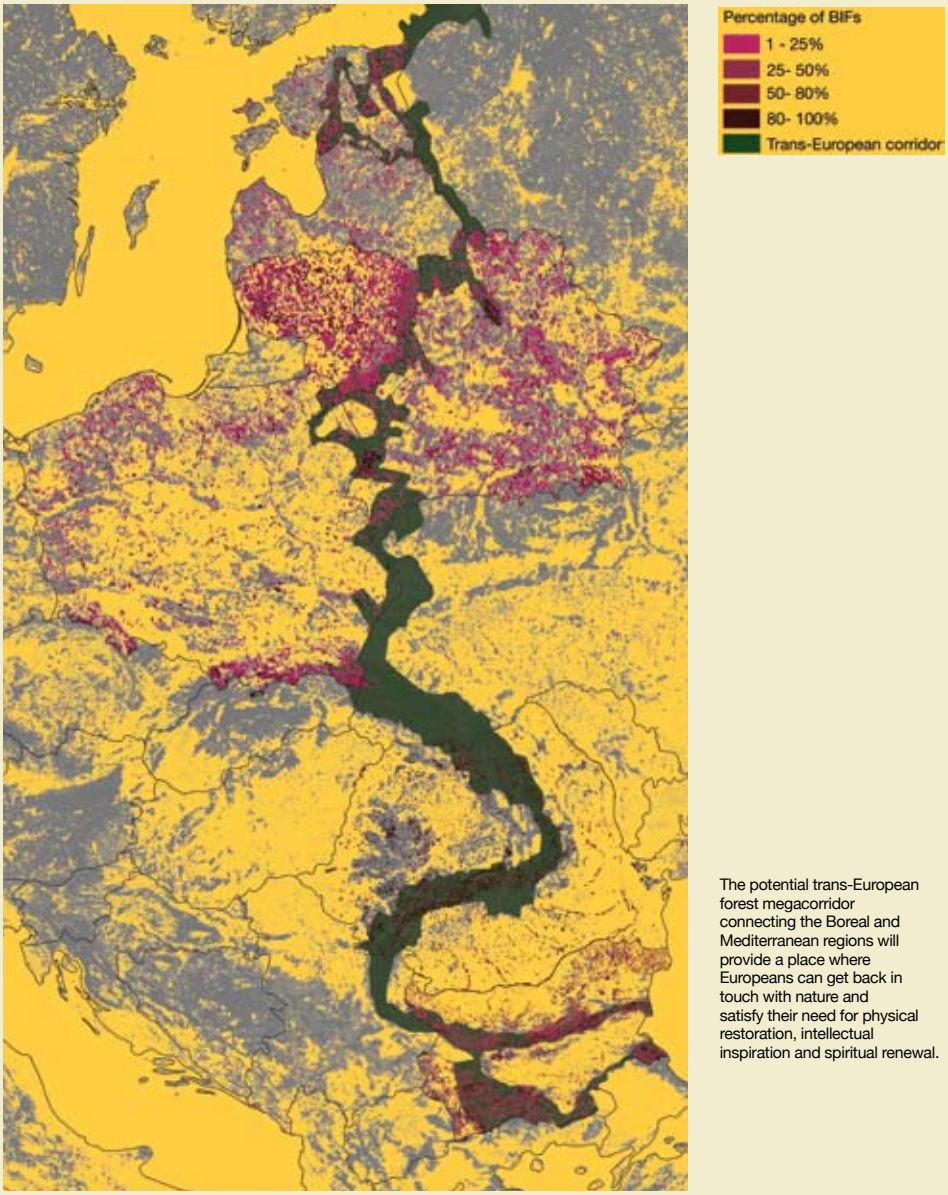
There is insufficient data about existing wilderness areas in Europe. The analysis of BIFs distribution shows the urgent need for the restoration of the ecological connectivity and for the creation of a trans-national forest corridor.

Much of Eastern Europe's rural culture is still in harmony with nature and therefore this part of the EU should be considered a priority for the development of nature-friendly social and economic infrastructures, helping local communities to become stewards of Europe's natural heritage and traditions.

The existing maps of BIFs in Eastern Europe provide a clear picture of a potential trans-European forested mega-corridor connecting the Boreal and Mediterranean regions.

Ukraine, Slovakia, Hungary and Western Balkan's countries are priority for future mapping. Identifying BIFs in these regions will complete the delineation of the trans-European forest mega-corridor.

In the long term such a forest corridor in Europe will secure the survival of vital species populations, gene exchange and species movements. It will also play a fundamental role to alleviate climate change impact on biodiversity and reduce carbon released in the atmosphere.



The potential trans-European forest megacorridor connecting the Boreal and Mediterranean regions will provide a place where Europeans can get back in touch with nature and satisfy their need for physical restoration, intellectual inspiration and spiritual renewal.

The BirdLife International's BIF Mapping programme can be an important step towards identification, mapping and protection of wilderness areas in the EU

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Biologically Important Forests in Europe

To secure natural forest biodiversity on the continent for continuous economic and cultural benefits is our prime concern

Biologically Important Forest is a concept proposed by the Birdlife's European Forest Task Force in order to identify and map Europe's forest areas of High Nature Value. The precise location of Biologically Important Forests provides a foundation for efficient protection and management of European forest ecosystems as well as for identifying existing wilderness areas


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A Biologically Important Forest (BIF) is a forest that has remained in a natural or close to natural state and is considered a key area for the protection of forest-dependent species which require a certain amount and quality of suitable habitat to survive and maintain vital populations. A BIF may be part of the existing protected area network designated by national legislation or may lie outside protected areas. The biological importance of forests is assessed on the basis of general BIF ecological criteria which only take into account biodiversity interests and are adapted nationally in each country participating in mapping in order to match local conditions.

General BIFs criteria:

- Little or no sign of human influence
- Average age of stand more than X years, where X is at least 20 years more than the commercial maturity species specific age
- Considerable amount/long term continuum of dead wood of different types
- Large blocks of unfragmented forests – bigger than 100 ha without clear cuts, draining, roads
- Forests on steep slopes
- Uneven age/canopy structure
- Presence of very old "veteran" trees from previous tree generations
- Forests after large-scale natural disturbance (fire, storm, bark beetle) and natural regeneration
- Endangered vegetation types
- Rare or endangered forest-dependent species present
- Rare broadleaved/coniferous species present in the dominant canopy layer
- Small water courses, surface springs, flooded areas
- Limited access areas

The main data source for the mapping projects are the national forestry databases supplemented by topographic maps, maps of protected areas (including Natura 2000 sites), data on forest dependant species, National Red Lists, CORINE Land Cover, scientific publications, satellite imagery, etc. Field checks are carried out to verify data accuracy and to complete the BIF database.

The BIF mapping results are stored in a GIS database organized by three levels. For the general public an interactive map service is available at www.forestmapping.net providing free maps of BIFs as 25ha grid (squares with 500 x 500m size).

BirdLife INTERNATIONAL

Maps of Biologically Important Forests in Eastern Europe call for better protection of Europe's last real forests

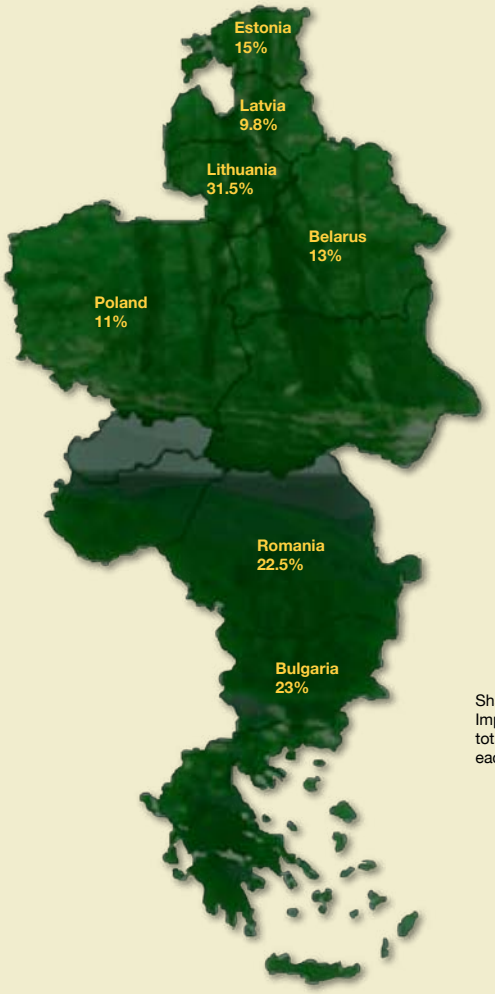
BirdLife International's BIF mapping programme has assessed forests with High Nature Value in seven European countries in Eastern Europe (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Bulgaria and Romania). The BIF mapping is an open-ended approach aiming for expansion to other regions and countries in Europe to create a consistent database and map of the European natural and semi-natural forest landscape.

The current results show that on average 18% of each mapped country's forest cover has been identified as a BIF.

Most of BIFs in Baltic states, Poland and Belarus can be found in rich lowland deciduous and mixed forests. This is very different from the overall forest characteristics in these countries since the dominant type are pine communities usually on relatively dry, sandy soils.

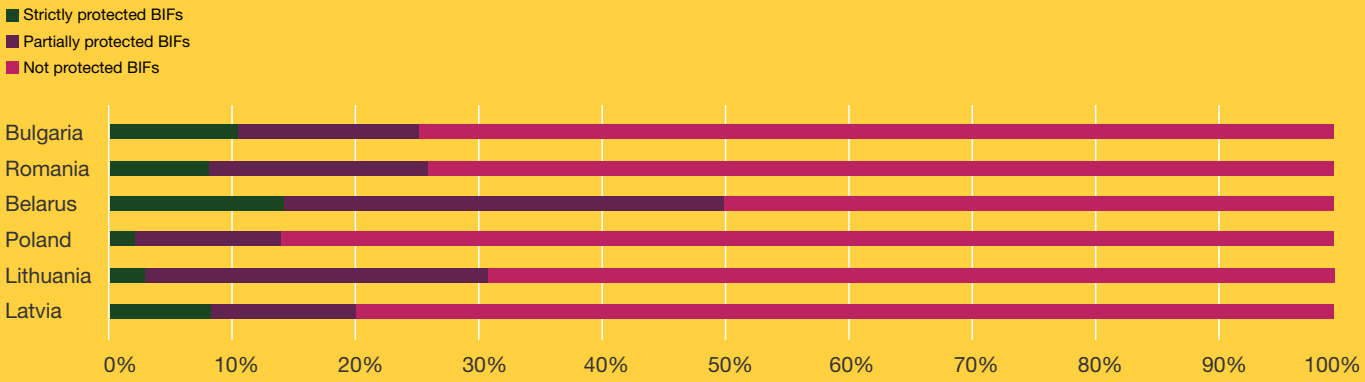
Most of the BIFs in Bulgaria are located in thermophilous deciduous forests and beech forest in mountainous areas, reflecting the dominance of deciduous forests in the country. In Romania most of BIFs are mesophile forests of beech and mixed beech forests in mountain areas which is largely the result of the dominance of beech in the country.

Majority of BIFs in Bulgaria, Romania and Poland are situated in mountainous areas. Principal factors predicting low human impact and therefore determining the survival of these BIFs are their relief, difficult access and the legal status of the territory.



Share of Biologically Important Forests of the total forest cover in each mapped country

Across mapped countries 64% of all BIFs are without any protection and less than 8% of BIFs are strictly protected, with further 28% under some form of meaningful but not strict protection.



* data for Estonia is currently unavailable

The best protected BIF type sites can be found in mountain areas in Poland (Upper mountain spruce forests) and in Pine bogs in Baltic States. The best protected BIF type in Bulgaria is Alpine coniferous forest with 50% strict and partial legal protection. The best protected forest type in Romania is Boreal forest of spruce, larch, Swiss pine and Scots pine of which 28% are unprotected.

Wet deciduous forests in lowlands, the most common BIF type in Baltic countries, Poland and Belarus, are not protected in sufficient amount since only less than 3% of them are strictly protected and only 15% are under any degree of protection.

The least protected BIF type in Bulgaria and Romania is lowland oak forest as more than 90% of BIFs of Turkey oak forests and Downy oak forests are unprotected in Bulgaria and respectively more than 66% of Thermophile forests of Turkish oak and Hungarian oak are outside protected areas network in Romania.

The results of the last mapping project confirm that adequate protection of BIFs requires improving the national protected areas networks in two aspects – increasing the extent of protected areas, and improving the representation of currently underprotected forest types in the network.

BIF maps – potential guidance for the improvement of forest protection in the Natura 2000 sites

Forests play a significant role in Natura 2000 ecological network as they constitute almost one third of its total area. 70% of the total area of BIFs in Bulgaria, 50% in Romania and 52% in Poland are located within the Natura 2000 network.

Effective protection and management of the majority of Natura 2000 sites in the Eastern European countries is still not achieved due to the lack of management plans for the Natura 2000 protected areas.

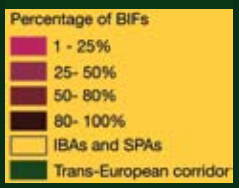
The designation ordinances of most Natura 2000 sites are not sufficiently clear and specific when it comes to restrictions and modification of the general forestry management practices.

One additional problem for Bulgaria and Romania is that most of the locally endangered habitats are not sufficiently represented in the Natura 2000 network as they are not included in Annex I of the Habitats Directive. Therefore the designation of Natura 2000 sites is not sufficient to ensure specific protection of the BIFs within these sites, except for the cases where Natura 2000 sites overlap pre-existing protected areas with management plans such as national parks.

The BIFs concept offers a fondation for improving forest protection in the Natura 2000 sites as they show large unprotected core sites as well as smaller valuable fragments in need to be connected through sensitively managed buffer zones and corridors in surrounding commercial forests.

The network will be substantially improved if there are specific guidelines provided on the designation of strictly protected, and non-intervention management zones within the sites containing BIFs.

BIF maps can guide decision makers towards improved ecological coherence and connectivity of the Natura 2000 network and can help to identify the measures to maintain and restore Favourable Conservation Status of forest habitats



For more information please visit www.forestmapping.net