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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Natural resources management on the example of Białowieża Forest: repercussions for Europe
	- Information from the Polish delegation

Delegations will find in the Annex an information note from the Polish delegation on the above subject, to be dealt with under "Any other business" at the Council (Environment) meeting on 17 October 2016.

**Natural resources management on the example of Białowieża Forest:
repercussions for Europe****- Information from the Polish delegation -**

Białowieża Forest remains the best-known forest area of the Central European Plain. The total area of the forest, which straddles the border between the Republic of Poland and Republic of Belarus, is more than 143 000 ha, of which 63 000 ha lies within Polish territory and the rest in Belarus.

In Poland, 10 500 ha of the forest makes up Białowieża National Park, whereas the remaining 52 600 ha is managed by three districts of the State Forests National Forest Holding: Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka.

The Polish part of the forest is protected by various forms of nature conservation: the National Park accounts for 16.15 % of its area and nature reserves for 18.48 %, whilst the 'Puszcza Białowieska' Natura 2000 site, established under the Birds and Habitats Directives, encompasses the forest area in its entirety. In this context, it is worth noting that, for example, approximately 70 % of the Białowieża forest district is made up of habitats requiring protection compliant with the plan of protection tasks.

In addition, following the decision adopted by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in June 2014, the entire Białowieża Forest area was inscribed under the name '*Białowieża Forest*' on the UNESCO World Heritage List in accordance with the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. This means that the areas administered by the Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka forest districts form an integral part of the site, alongside Białowieża National Park. The site documentation presents the framework principles for its administration and information that tree felling and harvesting may be performed only to ensure the protection of valuable and protected natural habitats and species under the planning documents adopted for the area.

While preparing the application for renomination of the '*Białowieża Forest*' World Heritage site, a decline in tree stands, including in particular spruce tree stands, was observed. At the time, it seemed it would be possible to control this decline under national legislation and the assumed and adopted solutions for site management. Spruce forest decline in 2014 – 2015 was extremely extensive, covering as much as 30 % of the forest area. Natural conditions – mainly drought and, above all, an increasing outbreak of bark beetle – resulted in a mass dieback of spruce and a decline in tree stands, posing a serious hazard to habitats.

This situation caused the European Commission some concern. An international Conference entitled '*Białowieża Forest – myths, facts and future*' was therefore organised on 12-13 March 2016. The data presented during the lectures and visit to the Białowieża Forest site confirmed the risk posed to the condition of the natural habitats of the site (PLC200004), which is classed as both a Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Site of Community Importance (SCI) within the Natura 2000 network. The European Commission was primarily concerned with the threat of deterioration of the condition of forest habitats 91I0 (thermophilous oak forests), 91DO (swamp coniferous forests and swamp forests) and 91EO (alder and ash riparian forests), and also by the spurious information disseminated by the Polish and foreign press on the excessive felling of trees allegedly carried out in Białowieża Forest by Poland.

The field visit confirmed that a well-documented history existed for each tree stand inspected. Knowledge on the origins of each tree stand, its exploitation and changes linked to human economic activity over time are available in forest management plans rescued from war damage. The oldest plans date back to 1931-32.

The presentation of Białowieża Forest confirmed that it is a piece of the local population's cultural heritage whose exploitation over the years has been for the good of humans and of nature itself. This is demonstrated by the existence of monographs with maps documenting the territory, the names of individual parts of the forest and information on its use dating back to the 16th century. Its unique natural resources and extraordinary biodiversity also belong to the cultural heritage of local communities, which made use of the best knowledge and science in the field of forestry to manage the forest in order to serve mankind and preserve its condition.

As a result of the Conference, the Programme for Białowieża Forest as a UNESCO Cultural and Natural Heritage and Natura 2000 Site was initiated and signed by Jan Szyszko PhD, professor and Minister for the Environment, and Konrad Tomaszewski, Director General of the State Forests of Poland.

The programme is composed of two parts: the first covers the preparation of complete documentation on Białowieża Forest, including all legal and economic acts, press releases and letters retained by the Ministry of Environment and the Direction General of the State Forests, and making this documentation available to the general public.

The second part involves the research and monitoring programme financed by the State Forests. One of its assumptions is the designation of one third of the total area of the Białowieża Forest districts which is to be left untouched by human intervention. As regards the rest, the programme recommends immediately remedying the existing situation i.e. completing a full restoration of natural habitats. This dual action will illustrate how to save the forest: is it better to leave it alone as suggested by certain scientific institutions and NGOs, or to act, applying active protection methods?

The programme also includes the implementation of a complete natural resources inventory in each of the three Białowieża Forest districts.

As of this day, the following activities have been completed:

- 1) A complete inventory of all legal and economic acts as well as press releases on Białowieża Forest has been performed.
- 2) An inventory of the condition of the natural environment of the Polish part of Białowieża Forest has been completed.
- 3) The reparation process of two thirds of the managed forest area has commenced. It aims to restore lost Natura 2000 habitats and species by implementing the protection tasks detailed in the plan of protection tasks (restoration of hydrographical conditions, halting the expansion of invasive species, restoration of priority habitats and habitats for priority species, including among others the European bison – the largest European mammal).

- 4) No action will be undertaken on one third of the managed forest area. This area will be left untouched by human intervention and entirely exposed to spontaneous processes, as suggested by certain organisations and scientific circles. The responsibility for changes to the habitats and species in this third of the managed forest area will therefore be borne by those who supported such an approach. For the other two thirds, responsibility will fall to the parties implementing the reparation programme. The entire Polish section of the forest will be strictly monitored in terms of presence of habitats and species of importance for Natura 2000.

Due to the fact that Białowieża Forest is a unique cultural and national heritage site for the local community, to its importance on a global scale and to the fact that it is the subject of a discussion at the EU forum, it is justified for the European Commission to support the Polish Ministry of Environment, which is proposing to launch a similar experiment in other EU Member States with potentially similar habitats to the ones identified in Białowieża Forest. Poland declares its support in this field, offering to reintroduce species which have already gone extinct in these states. These include the European bison, a species which used to be found across Europe and now lives solely in Białowieża Forest. European bison living in the wild were reported to be extinct in England as early as the 17th century, and in France at the end of the 14th century. By the end of the 18th century, the European bison was found only in the Caucasus area (Caucasian wisent) and in Białowieża Forest (Lowland wisent). The latter died out in the wild as a result of wars and poaching.

By assessing the extinction process of this species in historical terms, one may form a general thesis that it started dying out in western Europe and survived for the longest period in Poland.

Polish scientists have restored the European bison population using specimens kept in captivity. To save the species, the International Society for European Bison Protection was established at the initiative of Professor Jan Sztolcman. Thanks to these activities, the European bison population in Białowieża Forest is currently 570. Over the 90 years or so that the European bison restitution programme has been running, Poland has made the greatest contribution to the reintroduction of the species, which has incurred tremendous financial costs.

The European bison restitution programme in Europe needs to continue, as evidenced by the species' protection status, listed in Appendices II and IV to the Habitats Directive and in the IUCN Red Book.

Upon restoration of habitats in central and western Europe, the species may be transported to all interested states. Poland may also participate in the costs of these initiatives.
