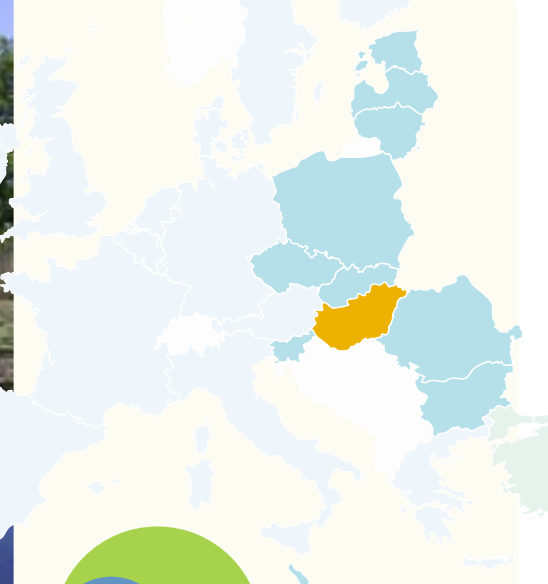




photo 1: © Krisztina Bélafalvy



Hungary Pannonian Treasure

Settled in the Pannonian basin in an area once covered by a primeval sea, Hungary is mostly covered by flat land. The **Great Plain** (puszta) covers most of the central and eastern parts of the country. The foothills of the **Alps** extend into Hungary from Austria in the west, while those of the **Carpathians** bound the country's northern border with Slovakia.

Hungary has one of the richest stores of natural wealth in all Europe, including a large number of indigenous species that are not native further to the west. Hungary's unique features have long been recognised by scientists, who have given its native plants (which also extend into neighbouring countries) the special classification Pannonicum. The area has also been classified by the European Union as an independent bio-geographical region, which will be important in implementation of the EU's Natura 2000 network of nature conservation areas.

Ice age enrichment

Hungary's rich mosaic of flora and fauna has been shaped by both natural and human forces. Natural conditions and a variety of climatic influences, including Atlantic effects from the north, Mediterranean ones from the south, and continental ones from the east, have played a part, as have natural and human history.

During the last glacial period some 10,000 years ago, an ice sheet extended to the very edge of the Pan-

nonian basin. Species forced south by the advancing ice settled here, and after the ice retreated many of them remained. A number of plants and animals survived during the ice age on the warmer, southern slopes, some of them evolving into new, unique species. After the glacial period some plants and animals were able to return to the Pannonian basin, contributing to the diversity of life forms in the area.

Cultivated landscape

Several thousand years of human activity further shaped Hungary's environment. Forests, which once covered 85% of the country's present territory, today only cover 18% of the country. Water too once was an important feature of the landscape, with a quarter of the country covered with rivers and wetlands. Large-scale canalisation of the rivers and drainage of the wetlands starting at the end of the 19th century have drastically reduced these areas to some 2% of the country's total territory.



photo 2: © Tibor Seregelyes/WWF-Hungary

Agriculture was the main beneficiary of these developments, and today dominates three-quarters of the Hungarian landscape. Hungary today is

Area: 93,030 km² (somewhat larger than Austria)

Terrain: mostly flat, with hills and low mountains to the western part of the country and along its border. The feet of the Carpathians and the Alps stretch along the Slovak and Austrian border. Two main rivers run through the country: the **Danube** and the **Tisza**. **Lake Balaton**, Central Europe's largest lake lies in the west; the **Lake Fertő** (Neusiedler See) is in the north, divided by the Austro-Hungarian border.

Elevation extremes: lowest point: Tisza River 78 m | highest point: Kékes 1,014 m

Land use: 51% arable land, 3.6% permanent crops, 12.4% pastures, 19% forests and woodland 19%, other: 14% (1999)

Protected areas: 10 national parks (484 883 ha), 36 Protected Landscape Areas (309 817 ha), and 142 Protected Sites (25 927 ha), Nature Reserves and Natural Monuments (together with locally protected reserves ca. 10% of the country's territory).

Population: 10,197,119 (2001)

Capital: Budapest – population 1,775,203 (2001)

the second most ploughed country in Europe. Extensive livestock management also has a strong tradition, enriching not only the country's cuisine and cultural heritage, but also its natural wealth.

For many centuries, large areas of grasslands were used as pastures and meadows for grazing animals and for producing hay. Such practices created a unique cultural landscape as



photo 3: © László Haraszthy

well as habitats for rare species that were able to adapt to these conditions. Changes in agriculture in the 20th century have drastically reduced the area occupied by these valuable, semi-natural habitats. Today, the survival of animals like the great bustard and meadow viper, or plants like the Transylvanian pheasant's eye increasingly depend on special efforts to maintain remaining grasslands.

Conservation tradition

Nature protection in Hungary goes back to the 19th century, with the first Nature Protection Act passed in 1910. Current nature protection legislation has in many aspects stricter provisions than EU legislation. Today, about 10% of Hungary's territory is formally protected in ten National Parks as well as a number of Protected Landscape Areas.

Similarly to other parts of Europe, there are very few if any untouched habitats left in Hungary. Cultivation or forest management have been going on for many centuries. In the past, traditional forms of extensive land use assured an

equilibrium and even synergy between the needs of humans and their environment. The intensification of agriculture and the rapid development of industry about a century ago has increasingly threatened the viability and survival of life at all levels of organisation, from individual species and populations to entire landscapes and ecosystems.

The process of draining wetlands was drastic in the past, and unfortunately has not been stopped completely. Such areas are important as feeding, breeding and living areas for a host of plants and animals. Continuing shrinkage of these habitats, with increasing urbanisation, pollution and intensive agriculture are further threatening rivers, lakes, ponds, bogs and marshes. Several

habitat types and species have already been affected – alder swamp woods and peatland areas have been drastically reduced, while many animal species, such as the beaver or sturgeon, have become extinct, or their populations greatly reduced (e.g. black stork, eastern white pelican).

Pan-European importance

Nevertheless, compared with other parts of Europe, particularly in the west, Hungary still possesses outstanding natural values. Approximately 42,000 animal and 2,200 higher plant species are native to the country, with 108 animal and 40 plant species formally recognized (by the European Commission's Habitats Directive) as being of pan-European importance.

For further information contact:

WWF-Hungary

Németvölgyi út 78/b, Budapest
1124, Hungary

Tel: + 36 1 214 5554,

panda@wwf.hu

www.wwf.hu

Useful links:

State of Hungarian environment

www.grida.no/enrin/biodiv/biodiv/national/hungary/main.htm

Hungarian national parks

www.madartavlat.hu/saj1e.htm

Hungarian Ministry of Environment and Water

www.ktm.hu

Institute of Ecology and Botany

www.botanika.hu

Environmental information (in Hungarian)

www.greenfo.hu

NGOs:

WWF

www.wwf.hu

Clean Air Action Group

www.levego.hu/angol.htm

Birdlife Hungary

www.mme.hu

REC

www.rec.hu



Photo 1: Wetlands once covered a quarter of Hungary's area; today they cover 2%.

Photo 2: Dolomite flax is one of a number of species that are unique to Hungary.

Photo 3: Extensive agriculture – an important feature of the Hungarian landscape.