

## Traversing Through Transylvania by Christine Devlin

Romania, and in particular southern Transylvania, is a hugely biodiverse country rooted in traditional culture. We were hosted by Fundatia ADEPT (Agricultural Development and Environmental



Protection in Transylvania), a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) which focuses on biodiversity conservation and rural development. Traditional skills and a 'slower pace of life' are still very much the cornerstones of the rural community in which they operate, known as Tarnava Mare. We were able to take time to speak to our local hosts and discussions were never rushed, the ethos of the trip was very much embedded in the slow paced food and farming movement, and we experienced a very welcoming hospitality that reflected the beautiful landscape. Transylvania literally means 'across the forest' and the setting very much lived up to its name.

Across every vantage point you didn't need to look far to see some forest, meadow, or rolling mountains.

I was particularly inspired by the beautiful mountainous landscape and huge diversity of flora and fauna, as well as taken in by the tales and wonder of my fellow peers on the trip. It seems as though a lot of the traditional and less environmentally impactful farming practices are hugely important for conserving biodiversity, and the awareness and compliance of local farmers we spoke to echoed this. Local farmers were particularly interested and appreciative of nature and the amazing landscape of habitats that surrounded them, and it is this ethos which enables the success of conserving priority species and habitats so successfully. The engagement techniques of ADEPT and others must be documented as part of the reason why, but also the tradition and family nature of a lot of the farms/businesses probably has a big part to play too. There is less commercialisation and most of the people who work on the farms either own the land (and have done for generations), are invested from a local community perspective, have a true passion for the land and animals/products, or all of the above.



One example which I think epitomises the marrying of traditional skills, rich history, and a respect for the landscape/local nature is the use of Carpathian mountain shepherd dogs (see pictures). Packs of these beautiful dogs are used to herd and protect the farm animals. There is little injury or adverse behavioural problems due to the fact the correct breeds and animals are used for their specifically bred purpose. In the UK we have become detached from the original purpose of many breeds of dogs which is often not solely to serve as a companion, but to work for a specific purpose. In the UK we are probably further advanced with our welfare standards, particularly in Scotland. However, the keeping of animals seems generally different in Romania, often dogs are free roaming and so can be hit by traffic more easily. We can share some of our culture around the advanced welfare standards of keeping animals. For example, routine neutering, vaccination, and microchipping of the many feral and stray dogs. Conversely, Romanians can share their expertise in using breeds to their full capacity and original applications.



It is important to use animals for their intended purpose. We are seeing increasing issues with abandonment in the UK, especially with the rising cost of living. Another cause of abandonment is also due to keeping animals as pets, without regard or attempt to stimulate particular breeds properly. For example, there are many border collies kept as pets in the UK. Some suffer with behavioural problems due to living in a way that is in conflict with their natural instinctive behaviour, or failing to satisfy their intelligence and working ability. When comparing collies (the UK's sheepdog/herding breed) with the Carpathian shepherd dogs there are some extreme differences. Firstly, larger in size, the Carpathian dogs resemble small wolves, but they also have a good degree of socialisation, shown by their extreme friendliness to humans but their fierce ability to scare off predators like brown bears and wolves. One farmer even told us of a recent encounter his pack had with a brown bear and how the pack expertly

herded the bear back into the woods without any harm coming to the bear, nor the pack.

Stringent laws such as only being able to keep a small number of dogs despite the size of farm and flock are not helpful, especially if the dogs are non-lethal and non-violent towards wildlife. We did hear of many anecdotal stories of certain farmers and shepherds getting more and more dogs, creating larger packs which are more violent and less socialised to humans. This is a consequence of an increase in natural predators due to more protection and improvement of habitat of conservation value. Romania has



had huge success in conserving these large predator species but is probably at a critical point now to ensure good relationships are maintained between conservation organisations like ADEPT and farmers, and the positive attitude towards nature does not deteriorate with the potential increase in human/wildlife conflict.

There is undoubtedly a sense of wellbeing generated from being around animals and nature, and within a culture with such rich heritage. However, the harmony which exists around the use of traditional skills and techniques is not the only outcome. Shepherding is a tough, labour intensive and dangerous job, especially with the increasing number of natural predators. This, coupled with more young people moving away to cities or other countries means sustainable development and preservation of nature and traditional skills could be at risk.

There is also a real challenge in motivating local people to do more than just appreciate the natural world. Despite many being so connected to the land and nature, there is a limited culture of philanthropy or actively contributing funds towards conserving it. On many of our visits throughout the week, locals were hugely connected to nature and understood the importance of it, even when bears were taking their livestock, but there still seems to be a (perhaps cultural) disconnect when it comes to donating towards supporting charities like ADEPT and this passion and respect translating into long term monetary support.

In the UK the legacy (gifts in Wills) market is worth more than £3 billion a year to charities, and this is expected to grow by more than a quarter between 2022 and 2026. Despite the war in Ukraine and cost of living crisis the legacy market remains strong, and is the single biggest area of growth in the fundraising market too. In Romania it seems family, churches, and children's charities take cultural precedence for legacy giving, over nature and cultural organisations like ADEPT.

However, charitable giving is seeing rapid growth in Romania, with NGOs seeing particular growth in regular giving and online giving. Independent media in Romania has also raised some much needed awareness of the importance of NGOs and the value a donation can have in contributing to their work. If people see NGOs as reliable, delivering on their promises, and doing work the state is not capable of doing there will be, as has been seen already, an increase in engagement such as volunteering, donations or spreading awareness online.



In the UK, legacy is not just a means of philanthropy or tax avoidance, it is also a way to create real meaning for the supporter. It gives supporters a sense of content, of impact, and of contributing to something bigger than themselves, as well as a sense of living on indefinitely through the charity's future work.

With different fundraising methods growing in popularity in Romania, naturally it would follow that legacy giving will be next in this trend. I would suggest local organisations jump on this and start to think about their long term strategy before the market gets saturated.

Much like the conserved tradition of using the Carpathian mountain dogs (puppies are rarely sold, usually just passed on to other farms who will use them in the traditional way), humans too desire a long legacy and the ability to pass tradition on across generations. Nature in Transylvania is so vibrant and extensive, it may not seem like a cause that needs active support, or probably not urgently to locals. Hopefully, the legacy of tradition can be embedded within the messaging of charities and this inspiration and connection can be diverted to monetary support with time and patience, much like ADEPT has shown through its widespread and successful engagement work. It is much easier to conserve something and maintain a landscape rather than lose it completely and have to reintroduce species and habitats from scratch. Perhaps initial focus could be on engaging UK based trustees and supporters, followed by development of a similar more targeted and culturally appropriate fundraising/legacy strategy in Romania.

