

EXPANSION OF NATURA 2000 EUROPEAN ECOLOGICAL NETWORK

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Abstract: Created at the beginning of 1992, Natura 2000 network represents a structure aimed at protecting nature. At the same time, it is "the foundation of community politics of environment protection", being in a permanent process of monitoring and expansion to new areas that present ecological importance [11]. Up to 2011, in Romania 381 locations were declared Sites of Community Importance (273 SAC - Special Areas of Conservation and 108 SPA - Special Protection Areas). They were declared by Order no. 1964/2007 regarding the establishment of the protected area regime for the Sites of Community Interest, as integral part of European ecological network Natura 2000 in Romania and by Government Decision 1284/2007 regarding the declaration of areas of special bird and fauna protection as integral part of the European ecological network 2000 in Romania [1,2,3]. It is common knowledge that the year 2010 was "the international year of biodiversity", because of the **decline of ecosystems**. People are concerned about the negative impact of man on natural ecosystems becoming ever stronger in the past years [1,3]. The year 2011 is important from the point of view of biodiversity, especially through the measures taken by authorities and by the civil society towards protecting our natural heritage. More concrete, these measures refer to declaring, by law, new areas of community importance or expansions of the already-existing ones. This contributes to the expansion and coherence of Natura 2000 European ecological network in Romania and Europe. Timiș County covers 8697 km², thus being the largest county in the country. Plains are the main landforms in Timiș County, covering 85% of its surface. From the point of view of biodiversity, the habitats in Timiș County are characterized by a specific composition of the flora and fauna, components of biocenoses, influenced by various climatic or edaphic factors [1,3]. The present paper aims to analyze the designation of new protected areas of community interest in Timiș County and the representativity of natural habitats of grasslands and hay meadows among these.

Key words: expansion of Natura 2000 European ecological network, habitats of grasslands and hay meadows

INTRODUCTION

The designation of protected natural areas in the frame of Natura 2000 Ecological Network is based on two European Union Directives: Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), published in 1992, which requires national and European selection of special conservation areas (SAC – Special Areas of Conservation) and Bird Directive (79/402/EEC), published in April 1979, which requires the establishment, at national level, of special protection areas (SPA – Special Protection Areas) [11]

Natura 2000 sites present the characteristics of the bio-geographic regions where they were declared; some of these were declared in two or even three regions. The territory of Romania includes five bio-geographic regions:

1. The Continental Bioregion – comprises the central, southern and northeastern areas; the majority of these are agricultural areas, with hot summers and cold winters.
2. The Alpine Bioregion – made up of the Carpathian Mountains. It has cold climate, forests and rocky mountaintops, home of almost half of the European large carnivore population (bear, wolf, lynx).

3. Pannonian Bioregion – the arid plains in the west of Romania.

4. Steppic Bioregion – the low lands in the southeast of Romania and wet areas in the Danube Delta and the Black Sea.

5. Pontic Bioregion – the western Black Sea beaches and the eastern part of the Danube Delta, home of many species of fauna.

Timiș County covers a surface of 8697 km², thus being the largest county in the country. Plains are the main landforms in Timiș County, making up 85% of its surface. From the point of view of biodiversity, the habitats in Timiș County are characterized by a specific composition of the flora and fauna, components of biocenoses, influenced by various climatic or edaphic factors of the Pannonian bioregion [1,3,10,11]

MATERIAL AND METHODS

EU and Romanian bills in the field of environment protection and ecological biodiversity were the main material used for this paper. The method we used was that of comparative analysis of the provisions in new bills appeared in 2011, for assessing the degree of expansion of the Ecological Network Natura 2000 in Romania, and especially in Timiș County, focusing on the representativity of natural habitats of grasslands and hay meadows.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a Member State of the European Union, in accordance with the provisions of Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC, Directive 79/409/CEE regarding the conservation of wild birds, replaced by Council Directive 2009/147/CE of November 30 2009 regarding wild bird conservation ("Birds" Directive), and E.U. Accession Treaty, Romania has the obligation to create the ecological network 2000, by designating protected natural areas of community importance (SAC and SPA).

In 2007, 273 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) were declared in Romania by M.O. no. 1964/2007, making up 13.21% of the Romanian territory. These were designated following the implementation of Habitats Directive - 92/43/CEE. In the same year, 108 Special Protection Areas (SPA) were designated by Government Decision no. 1284/2007 regarding the declaration of special protection areas, after the implementation of Birds Directive 79/409/EEC (amended and supplemented). However, The European Commission found both their number and their surfaces inadequate.

As Romania, in its quality of Member State of the European Union, partially fulfilled its obligation, the list of areas declared initially did not correspond in number and surface to the new inventory of Important Bird Areas (IBA) acknowledged by BirdLife International, The European Commission started against Romania an action for failure to meet its obligations to designate these areas.

The Important Bird Areas Inventory, published by BirdLife International, is of utmost importance and has to be taken into consideration when, due to lack of scientific evidence, a member state cannot prove the fulfillment of its obligation to designate the most adequate areas (in number and surface) as special protection areas and areas of community importance. The European Union Court of Justice has constantly stated that, although not mandatory for the member states from a judicial point of view, the IBA inventory has a recognized scientific value and can be used by the European Union Court of Justice as reference for assessing the way in which the member state has fulfilled that obligation.

So far, the European Union Court of Justice has given judgment against nine member states, in similar cases, for inadequate designation of Special Protection Areas (Portugal – case C 191/05, Ireland - case C-418/04, Greece – case C-334/04, Spain – case C 235/04, Austria –

case C-209/04, Italy – case C 378/01, France – case C-202/01, Finland – case C-240/00, The Netherlands – case C 3/96).

During these court procedures and litigations, the Romanian authorities committed to the realization of a scientific study that would serve as the basis for designating other new protected natural areas as part of Natura 2000 ecological network.

Thus, in the last trimester of 2011, two new bills were adopted, namely:

- Order no. 2387 of September 29, 2011, to modify MO of Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development no. 1964/2007 on the establishment of the protected natural area regime of the sites of Community interest, as integral part of the European ecological network Natura 2000 in Romania

- G.D. no. 971 of October 5, 2011, to amend and supplement G.D. no.1284/2007 regarding the designation procedure of SPAs as integral part of the European ecological network Natura 2000 in Romania.

By these, new natural protected areas of community importance were designated as part of the European ecological network Natura 2000, as follows:

- 109 Special Areas of Conservation
- 40 Special Protection Areas

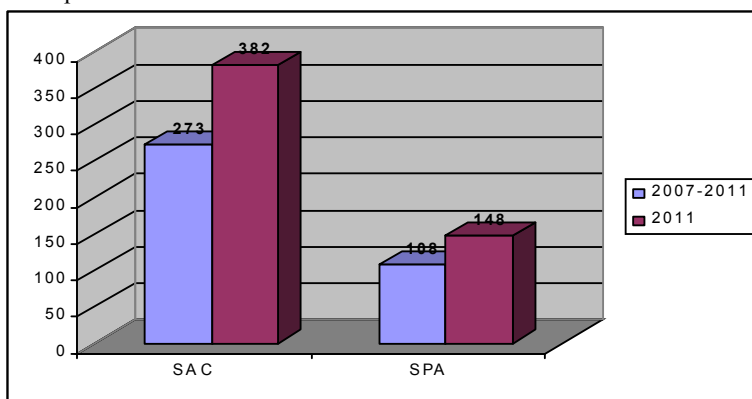


Figure 1. The situation of protected natural areas of community interest designated in Romania, 2007-2011

In Romania, at present, Natura 2000 Ecological network is made up of 530 protected natural areas of community interest (382 SAC and 148 SPA), which represent approximately 25% of the country's territory.

Some of these areas overlap, being designated both SAC and SPA, and others cover part of the protected natural areas of national interest (national parks, natural parks and reservations).

The situation in Timiș County

Ten areas of community importance were designated in Timiș County (5 - SAC and 5 SPA) in 2007. In 2011, 13 new areas were designated (7 SAC and 6 SPA), and the existing areas were expanded (i.e. ROSCI0109 Timiș Valley, ROSPA0069 Lower Mureș Valley).

Of the 13 new areas of community importance designated in 2011, three of them have the same object of protection priority: habitat **6240* Sub-Pannonian steppic grasslands**, namely:

- RO SCI 0346 Ciacova Grassland

- RO SCI 0348 Jebel Grassland
- RO SCI 0402 Valley in Sanandrei

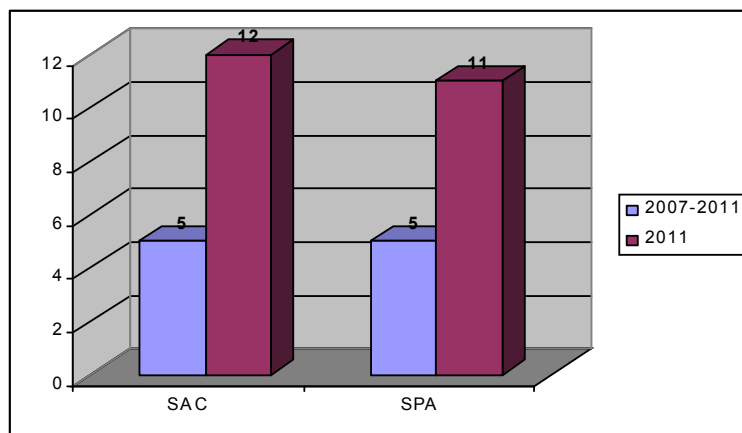


Figure 2. The situation of protected natural areas of community interest designated in Timiș County, 2007-2011

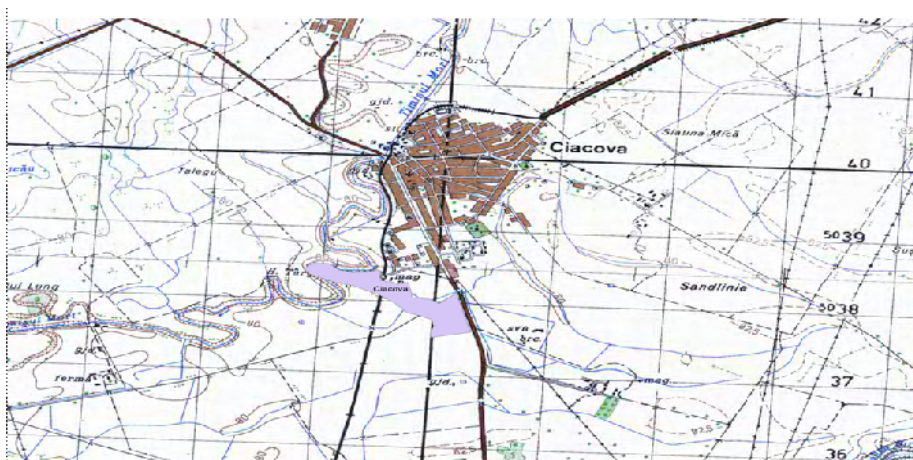


Figure 3. Map location of RO SCI 0346 Ciacova Grassland [Source MMP-ANPM-ARPM Timișoara]

The object of the other areas of community importance is strictly habitats of mammals, amphibians and reptiles, species of invertebrates or various bird species. Nevertheless, they cannot be overlooked from the point of view of the natural grasslands that make them up. Thus, they need to be researched in terms of the vegetation type and composition, because these are important for ensuring good conditions for the development of most species of vertebrates, invertebrates and certain plants. In many cases, grasslands can be considered as the foundation for food chains in the natural world.

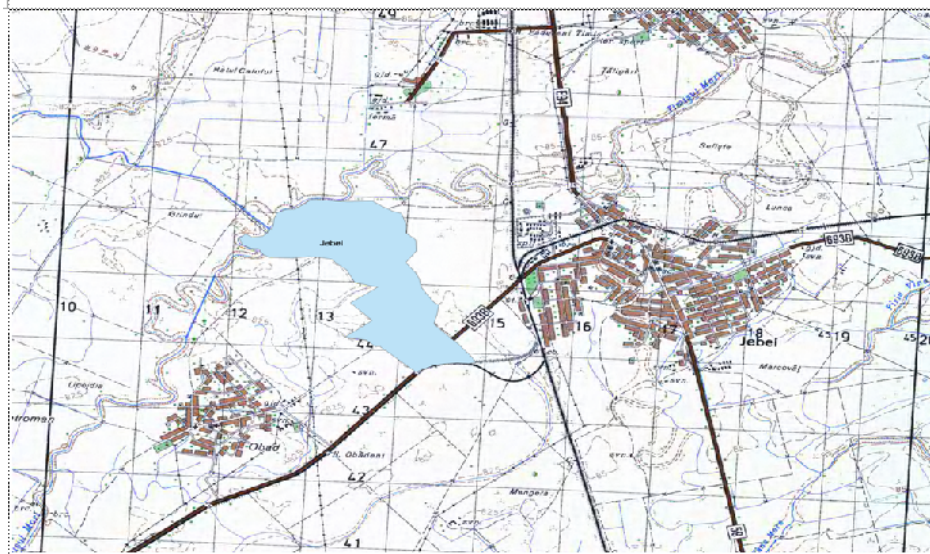


Figure 4 Map location of RO SCI 0348 Jebel Grassland [Source MMP-ANPM-ARPM Timișoara]

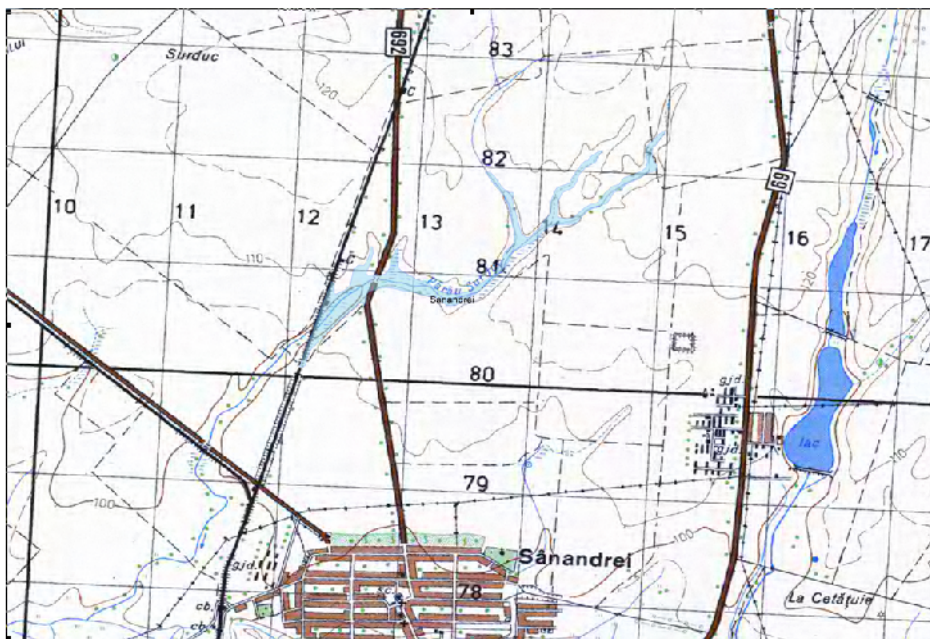


Figure 5 Map location of RO SCI 0402 Valley in Sânnandrei [Source MMP-ANPM-ARPM Timișoara]

CONCLUSIONS

Although the designation of new areas of community interest was made in Romania after court procedures and litigations started by the European Commission, it is of utmost

importance in terms of protecting nature and biodiversity. It ensures technical and judicial support for their management and provides access to European funds for elaborating and implementing management plans and management regulations concerning these areas.

We have to take into account the fact that designation of new Natura 2000 areas may have consequences, such as limitations of the use of certain areas (i.e. restriction to exploit certain resources, interdiction to perform certain activities). In accordance with paragraph 26 (1) of Emergency Government Ordinance 57/2007, amended and supplemented, the owners or concessionaires of the plots of land included in the protected natural areas where there will be restrictive measures (set by management plan or conservation measures) will receive compensations, the amount of which will be established according to legal procedures. These compensations will come either from the state budget, within the budgeted limits, or from European funds.

The next important stages that have to be covered after the designation are award of custody or management of the areas and elaboration of management plans and regulations, in accordance with the law. It is only after these steps have been finalized that we will be able to talk about ensuring a real conservation status of the habitats and species for which Natura 2000 exists. Only then shall we be able to know at any time the conservation status and the threats to protected habitats and species.

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