

Goodbye mountain tourism - absurd but true: No more hiking in the woods

by [Diana Scarlat, jurnalul.ro](#) | 17 Apr 2024

Environmental activists have collected over 58,000 signatures calling for the removal of provisions in the new Forestry Code restricting access to both state and privately owned forests.

The basis for introducing these [access](#) bans on forest land is contradictory, and the way the text of the law has been formulated is very open to interpretation, so that it could end up that mountain tourism in Romania will no longer be possible, as the owner of each forest area will have to give his consent, even for walks on marked trails. Approvals will also be needed from each manager or owner and volunteers who want to clear the forest of rubbish or check for deforestation, poaching or other illegal activities. There will be no more journalistic investigations either, because no one will enter the forest without permission from Romsilva or the owners.

Initially, several landowners' associations accused environmental NGOs of wanting to close forests, along the lines of the WWF's model in Latin American, African and Asian countries, where vast private areas have been created exclusively for those who can afford to pay huge sums to access protected areas. However, Romania's new forestry code is being attacked by environmental NGOs and supported by some forest owners, even though the main reason for restricting access is the need to protect nature.

In the scandal that has been going on for several years between forest owners and the Conservation Carpathia Foundation (which is buying up vast areas to create a nature park of over 200,000 hectares, on the Yellowstone model), it was precisely the composesorates and owners' associations that were contesting the right to close off forests with barriers and rangers. On the other hand, the provisions of the new Forestry Code imply much the same thing that the Conservation Carpathia Foundation is now doing, but are supported by some of the very landowners who are in conflict with the Yellowstone project, while environmental NGOs are struggling to remove the restrictions from the law.

Collecting 100,000 signatures

In March this year, when the bill was finalised by the Environment Ministry and went to a vote in Parliament, environmental activists launched a petition that is still gathering signatures, now reaching more than 58,000 of the 100,000 that the NGOs had set for themselves.

"They lied to us. The government introduced an article after the public consultations ended that allows access to forests only after notifying the owner. The regulation covers all forests, not just private ones, as the original text of the draft Forestry Code stated. (...) If we do not convince the authorities to change the current draft, more than half of Romania's forests could become inaccessible to the general public" - says the environmental NGOs' petition.

Only with the agreement of the administrators

But the situation is much worse, because access will be restricted in the same way on forest areas belonging to the Romanian state, not just privately-owned ones, according to Article 58 of the new

Forestry Code. For example, in paragraphs 4-6, there are the following provisions: "(4) In forests located in protected natural areas, public access to the forest may be restricted by the regulations of the management plans of the protected natural areas. (5) Public access to the forest by bicycle is allowed on forest roads, trails and paths, at one's own risk and in compliance with the conditions set by the land manager/owner, as appropriate. (6) The development of paths and trails for walking, running, equestrian and bicycle tourism in FFN shall be with the consent of the forest manager in the case of publicly or privately owned forests, or with the consent of the owner in the case of other forms of ownership. In forests in protected natural areas, the development may be carried out only with the approval of the administrator of the protected natural area".

In other words, any other area of forest where someone wants to hike, cycle or camp will need the consent of the forest manager or owner.

All the contradictions to protect nature

The motivation for introducing these restrictions, from the perspective of some forest owners, is mainly linked to the danger of fire. It is also argued that forests are private property and should be subject to the same provisions as any other type of property.

In general, the reasons are related to environmental protection: those who walk in the forest set fires, leave behind rubbish, destroy nature and cannot be controlled, especially those who go off-road with jeeps, ATVs or Enduro motorbikes. All these arguments come from forest owners.

NGOs are also calling for the restrictions to be lifted, on the grounds that if access to forests is restricted, journalists and activists who are now uncovering illegal logging and poaching will not be allowed in.

"A toxic article in the text of the draft says that 'Owners of private forests may restrict pedestrian access by prominently displaying these restrictions.' [1] Meaning they will ban us from walking in these forests. Equally seriously, journalists or environmental activists who try to investigate possible illegal logging will not be able to investigate either in private or state forests. The text of the forestry code does not include them in the professional categories that have the right to work in forests. [2] They will become criminals for trying to do their job, to save the forest from those who want to make a profit by illegally felling trees," the environmental NGOs write in the text of the petition.

All these arguments will be brought to the debates in Parliament, from both sides, including the petition with the 100,000 signatures for the removal of access restrictions.