Virgin Status Assessment of Plješevica Forest in Bosnia - Herzegovina

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Abstract

Virgin forests are relatively rare in the European temperate zone. This is due to the continuous use of forest historically and to increasing high population densities. Virgin forests are forest where the structure and dynamics have developed entirely under natural conditions, without any human interference or influence. This article assesses the Plješevica forest in Bosnia Herzegovina to establish whether it can be classified as virgin forest. The structure and components of the forest were assessed in a 1 ha sample plot and four 400m² quadrats. The values of the biodiversity indexes (as defined by Shannon and Wea ver, Krebs and Meyer), species richness and evenness, the distribution of the different stand development stages and the proportion of dead wood lead to the conclusion that Plješevica forest presents a set of structural and dynamic characteristics close to the ones typical for virgin forests in Europe, so in order to maintain its status as such, in the meantime it should undergo a protection management programme.

Keywords: diversity, evenness, dead wood, unmanaged forest

Introduction

The term 'virgin forest' has many definitions in the forestry specific literature. Čermak (1910) defines virgin forest as "a forest which looks like it was never touched by a human", Leibundgut (1993) describes such forest as "a forest untouched by humans, with enormous trees, great volume of trunk, and hardly passable floor space with much dead wood", Rubner (1960) considers virgin forest to be "forest vegetation which belongs to the climatic climax stage of vegetation in terms of development and growth". According to Korpel (1995) the virgin forest is a "forest whose composition, development, growth and other life processes are driven by the ecological parameters, primarily by the climate characteristics".

What these definitions have in common is the belief that life processes in virgin forests are determined by ecological factors and that the human influence is negligible. In Europe, as well as in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH), people have used forest resources in an unsystematic manner for centuries, taking what they needed when they needed it; such as material for construction, timber for firewood, wood for coal, etc. This kind of forest use inevitably influences the composition, the presence and the variety of species and the structural development of stands which we call natural forests.

The main differences between managed forest and virgin forest are considered to be related to the proportion of standing and dead trees (occurrence of dead trees in virgin forest is higher), the horizontal and vertical structure of the stand (in virgin forest, trees are found in all development stages), and the presence of natural regeneration (in virgin forest, the natural regeneration occurs throughout the area).

Virgin forests are important remnants of valuable and rare forest ecosystems. They provide a basis for close-to-nature silvicultural research and applications, for designing national networks of protected forest and for providing a reference for naturalness assessment of other forests more or less managed.

Bosnia Herzegovina's forests (1.266.000 ha) are part of the Piceo-Abieti-Fagetum associations, beech, fir and Norway spruce representing more than 80 percent of Bosnia Herzegovina's forest area (Pintarić, 1978). The vast majority of forests in BiH are managed primarily for wood production; however, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) has 0.3% of its forests classified as virgin forests, namely Perucica, Janj, Lom and Trstionica forests. Plješevica forest (Fig. 1) is considered to be the fifth virgin forest located in BiH, but no detailed studies have recently been carried out to confirm this status.
Methodology

In order to investigate the virgin status of Plješevica forest, species composition, distribution of the diameter classes and development stages, proportion of dead wood and dieback trees were assessed in a 1 ha (100x100m) sample plot situated in the centre of the studied forest.

Four polygons were randomly selected for phytocenosis assessment according to Braun – Blanquet method (1964) as well as for species richness by adopting a quadrat method (20 x 20 m size) - see Fig. 2.

Each species was recorded by frequency and coverage range and all plant species identified within the quadrat were recorded in a Turboveg 2.38 database (Hennekens and Schaminee, 2001), and exported to Juice 6.4 programme (Tichy and Holt, 2006) for analysis.

For each quadrat, the biodiversity and evenness indexes were calculated using the Shannon-Wiener Index (Krebs, 1999). Also, the identified plant species were cross checked against the Red Book of Bosnia and Herzegovina as enlisted by Šilić (1996). Each such species was scored according to IUCN standards as follows: E – highly endangered species, V – endangered or vulnerable species, R – rare or potentially endangered species.

Results and discussions

Forest phytocenosis

A total of 71 species were identified and recorded (based on the quadrats established in the study area), of which 4 were rare and/or endangered species. On the basis of floristic system analysis (Tab. 2) it resulted that the plant community is part of the Dinara forests of Abieti-Fagetum dinaricum association (Tregubov, 1957). This community of beech and fir belongs to Aremonio-Fagion alliance (Torök et al. 1989). This alliance is stipulated in Annex I of the Habitat Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC) as habitat 91K0 - Illyrian Fagus sylvatica forests, which is of community interest.

The survey identified the presence of four species which are classified according to IUCN standards as endangered (Tab. 3).

The biodiversity indexes were also calculated for the study plots, and their values are presented in Tab. 4. According to Krebs (1999), the maximum values of Shannon – Wiener index do not exceed 5,00 for biologi-

Study area

The study area is a forest stand of 38,8 ha, located at 44°45´ north latitude, 15°45´ east longitude, at an average altitude of 1120 m on a north-eastern slope of Plješevica Mountain, which is located east of the Una River, near the border between Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina. Plješevica belongs to the Dinara Mountain system, which is mostly made up of Jurassic limestone. The dominant soil type is eutricambosol and small patches of renzina are also found.

The climate characteristics of the area are summarised in Tab. 1 based on the data provided by the meteorological stations of Bosanski Petrovac and Drinić, which are the closest ones to the investigated forest.

Tab. 1. Climate data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meteorological station</th>
<th>Altitude (m)</th>
<th>Mean air temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Mean rainfall (mm)</th>
<th>Length of the growing season (days)</th>
<th>Potential evaporation in April-September (mm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>April-September</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>April-September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosanski Petrovac</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>1198</td>
<td>630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinić</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
cal communities, therefore the diversity of higher plants in the examined area could be described as average. The index of 'Evenness' (Krebs, 1999) established for the study plots shows no over domination of one or more species.

### Distribution of tree diameter

One indicator for the lack of past production management could be the diameter distribution of trees. Fig. 3 presents the stand composition by diameter classes and shows an uneven age structure with a slightly irregular distribution of trees in the higher diameter classes (from 65 to 105 cm).
The presence of large-size trees is one of the major indicators for a virgin forest according to Leibundgut (1993). In addition to this, in a managed forest the tree diameter does not usually exceed 80 cm (Pintarić, 1999), so the tree distribution by diameter classes in the studied forest is close to the diameter distribution typical for an uneven-aged/un-managed forest.

Forest development stages

Within the 1 ha studied plot, the presence of different development stages was assessed in rectangular plots (quadrats) of 20 m x 20 m placed inside the study area. The size of these plots (400 m²) is considered adequate for establishing the presence of different development stages in a virgin forest, as described by Meyer (1999). The distribution of the development stages within the studied plot is shown in Fig. 4, and their description and frequency is presented in Tab. 5.

It can be noticed that all the development stages typical for a virgin forest were identified within the 1 ha study area. Development stages are rotating on a relatively small area and have approximately the same frequency of occurrence. In order to assess the diversity of development stages, the Shannon-Wiener index (Shannon and Weaver, 1976) and Evenness index (Pielou, 1966) were calculated by using the presence of individual development stages in relation to the area they covered, instead of the number of species.

The values of the Shannon’s index (2.455) and Evenness index (0.807) for the study plot in the Plješevica forest are significantly above those calculated for some virgin forest reserves in Germany and Albania (presented in Tab. 6) (Tabaku, 1999), thus indicating a potential virgin forest.

Natural regeneration was found on 96% of the area, being well represented in all plots but one quadrat, where it covered less than 25% of the plot, indicating that the entire area surveyed in this study has gone through a natural process of rejuvenation, following a pattern found in unmanaged forests.

Dead wood and dieback trees

Presence of dead wood is important to biological diversity within a forest stand, and it is a critical factor for the development of some species like mushrooms, lichens, mosses, arthropods, rodents, birds etc. Based on research

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Tab. 3. Rare and endangered species found in Plješevica forest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study plot</th>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Y - coordinate</th>
<th>X - coordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cardamine kitaibelii</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>5559179</td>
<td>4964186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Daphne laureola</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>5559179</td>
<td>4964186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lilium martagon</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>5559261</td>
<td>4964207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ruscus hypoglossum</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>5559179</td>
<td>4964186</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Species status according to the IUCN standards: E – highly endangered species, V – endangered or vulnerable species, R – rare or potentially endangered species.

Tab. 4. Indexes of diversity and evenness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biodiversity indexes</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>Mean values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of species</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon – Wiener Index</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenness</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3. Distribution of trees by species and diameter classes (10 cm) in the 1 ha study plot in Plješevica forest
focused on optimising tree stand diversity, it has been suggested that the proportion of dead wood in relation to the total wood mass should be around 20-25 % (Siitonen, 2001; Alexander, 2003) in unmanaged forests. In managed forests that share is much lower, at around 1-10 % (Meyer, 1999). Thus, one can conclude that an increasing proportion of dead wood is followed by increased biological diversity. Current forest management does not encourage increased presence of dead wood and the management guidelines prescribe its removal, as the presence is perceived as an increased risk of pest infestation. Therefore, the higher proportion of dead wood found in an area the less probability of a production management plan being in place. This could be a further indication of a possible unmanaged/virgin forest presence.

The dead wood proportion in the forest of Plješevica is presented in Tab. 7.

This tab. shows that the proportion of dead wood is 12 % of total wood mass for the 1 ha study plot, and it is higher for fir (14 %) than for beech (9 %). The larger proportion of dead wood in the case of fir might be explained by its smaller proportion in lower diameter classes (Fig. 3). The proportion of dead wood is higher than in managed forests and yet is within the limits specified by Droessler (2006) for European virgin forests. On the other hand, Fig. 4 shows that the dieback trees and dead trunks (quite common for the decaying and senescence phases) are unevenly distributed all over the study area.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that the work presented in this paper has some limitations due to a relatively small number of plots, the results show clearly that Plješevica forest presents a set of structural and dynamic characteristics close to the ones typical for virgin forests in Europe. Further investigations are needed in this respect and a protection status for Plješevica forest is recommended considering the small area of virgin forests in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
Tab. 7. Proportion of dead wood in total wood mass in Plješevica forest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Volume of living trees (m³/ha)</th>
<th>Volume of dead wood (m³/ha)</th>
<th>Total volume (m³/ha)</th>
<th>% of dead wood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beech</td>
<td>277.4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>306.0</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fir</td>
<td>352.8</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>413.2</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spruce</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sycamore</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European ash</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elm</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>651.5</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>740.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


