

The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

Hi Richard “**How was your holiday?**”

It wasn't a holiday - I was doing conservation volunteer work – it was a working holiday.

However it was great. Lots of hard work, lousy weather most of the time (they promised us unbroken sun shine so no improved suntan and no weight loss – maybe due to an excess of dumplings and beer !), iffy hotel and hotel food although the food was good when we ate out. Good company and a brilliant programme of cultural things laid on, such as a couple of language lessons, a history lesson, visits to museums, castles and chateaux, wine cellars and festivals(of which more later), and some trips to wildlife sites to bird watch, botanise and fungus foray. Three weeks away from home was a bit long but only because I had meetings in London for a couple more days before I could go home. Oh and I managed to damage both legs – didn't stop me working but was a nuisance. If I learnt one thing it was that my legs are not as young as they were or as young as I want them to be.

So tell me more – **what work were you doing?**

Clearing encroaching scrub and brambles from a valley side that is full of wildflowers that a whole lot of insects and butterflies rely on. It would have been grazed in the past but this has stopped (due to the prevailing agricultural economy) so blackthorn, robinia and brambles are taking over. We were using brush cutters, loppers and saws to cut stuff down and then burning or composting the stuff we cut. Unfortunately the rain slowed things down a bit – a couple of work days were cut short or cancelled and the locals tend not to work at weekends which was a shame, but it did mean we had more time for other things as well (of which more later).



Most days some local people turned up to help; students, a group from the bank on a development day and a party of the local majorettes (not in costume).

Why couldn't the money it cost to send you all from England be spent on **paying local people to look after the site**? It's called "pump priming" – the locals do not realise how important their valley is and the Czech economy does not provide for such luxuries as wildlife conservation at the expense of the Czech tax payer. It is only on the radar because a Czech student discovered it when surveying and decided that he would make it a personal project to improve and maintain the grassland. And he knew the organisers of the EUCAN project and asked for help. A UK group now goes out each year. The hope is that the locals will realise the "walley's" wildlife value and be inspired to look after it and provide grazing animals to maintain it. It seems to be working. A local farmer, Mr BAHA, agreed to provide some sheep to graze part of it if we fenced it. So we did and he did. 34 sheep and 15 goats duly arrived while we were there. And we started to fence another area which he will finish fencing and then graze – a result! - and it means that next year the group can move onto new areas to clear rather than having to re-clear areas of re-growth from previously cleared areas.

We also spent a day clearing overgrown vegetation from a local lady's orchard so she could replant it with apple trees. It is absolutely amazing how much can be achieved by 20 or so people working as a team for a day– it went from a jungle to a cleared area in just one day.



Besides the purpose of the trip is not just to work as conservation volunteers – it is all about cultural links between the host country and us. I made some new friends in the country and I learnt a lot about a part of the world I had never before given a thought to – and they learnt a bit about the English. I may never go back there but I can at least order a beer if I need to. "Pivo Prosime"

So what was so wrong with **the hotel and the food**?

Well nothing really given that I am used to backpacker type accommodation. But it would have been nice to have had a change of bedding at least once in the two weeks we were there and a quick Hoover of the bedroom floor after a week would not have gone amiss. But I'm a bloke so what gives. At least there was a bar – and the beer was cheap. They operated on a different time scale to us – known as "Czech time". Meals were usually about half an hour later than scheduled (time for another beer before dinner?). Which is fine when you get used to it but being an old Brit I'm not so much "impatient" as "keen to get on with it". And the food – well I didn't starve. Czech dumplings - nice the first time, as a novelty, but give me meat and two veg with potatoes any time. Lunch is the main meal which means dinner is a

“snack” – beans and pearl barley with gerkins for example? And scrambled eggs with lumps of pork rind for breakfast – better without the lumps. But I exaggerate – we had some really good meals out at lunch and you get used to dumplings in onion and cabbage soup with meat. And I liked the honey cake.



So what did you do in your spare time? **What was this cultural programme?**

It was full on! There weren't many days when we didn't do something between work and dinner. The first Saturday was taken up by the Histopedal, a festival of vintage bicycles through the ages with the riders all in period costume, followed by a party in the park in the evening. Fabulous village event attracting hundreds of people. They know how to party!



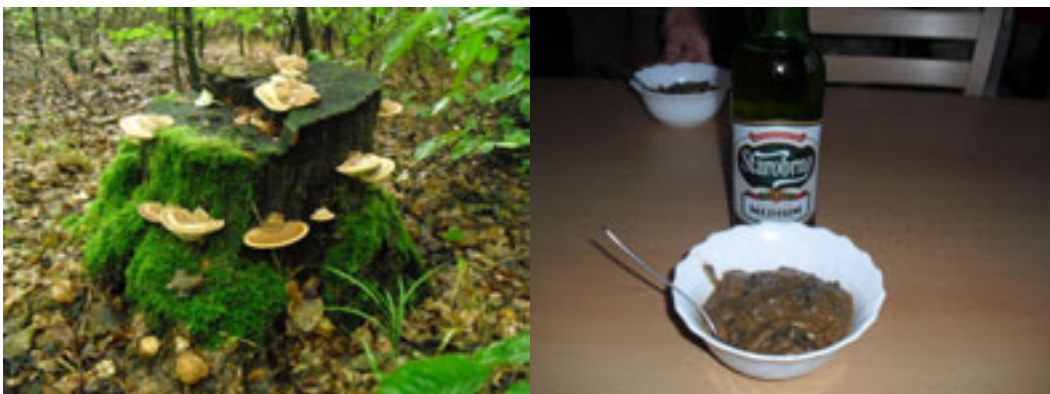
On one day we met the Mayor in his office for a formal reception, on two days we had a language lesson for an hour – even I learnt a few words. We had a history lesson followed by a conducted tour of the town museum – fascinating.



One day we went to an area of fish farming lakes which are stuffed full of birds and other wildlife,



on another we went for a walk in the local woods on a fungus foray, which was then cooked for us the next day by the local organiser of the project.



On one day the town held their annual vineyard closing ceremony whereby the vineyard is closed for a month before the harvest and woe betide anyone who enters the vineyard during that time. Much drinking followed by singing and dancing, all in traditional costume. Really evocative of a bygone era and taken very seriously. And some fabulous songs – they should make a record!



We went to a *son et lumier* type play in a castle, an organic herb festival which turned out to be a tour of a fruit tea factory but accompanied by the usual costumed songs and band, followed by a tour of the Knights Templar wine cellar.



We went to some enormous caves stuffed with stalagmites and stalactites and an underground river ride. And we got to ride on a penny farthing bike one afternoon. Much harder than it looks and absolutely hilarious.



The grand finale was a party hosted by the Mayor in the town wine cellar, with copious locally made wine and a fabulous spread of (good) food.



So what are your abiding memories?

The town public address system, sounding like something out of *The Prisoner*, used to tell the inhabitants anything of interest that was happening, Kathy's smile, Nigel's enthusiasm and unbounded energy, the hospitality and generosity of the locals, and Kushka's fabulous traditional costume. And the experience of travelling by train for 24 hours or more each way won't fade fast. Altogether a fascinating couple of weeks which had the satisfaction of doing some good hard beneficial outdoor work.



Report by Richard Cooke