

World news story: Speech by His Royal Highness Prince of Wales in Romania

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Domnule Rector, Doamnelor și Domnilor,

Sunt profund mișcat și foarte recunoscător pentru marea și deosebita onoare pe care mi-o faceți în această după-amiază.

To have a doctorate bestowed on me by the oldest university in Romania, not to say one of the most prestigious in Europe, is very flattering indeed. It is now almost exactly twenty years since my first visit to this part of your wonderful country, in 1997. In the intervening period I have managed to travel to other parts of Romania, but that first visit to Transylvania made an indelible impression on me. I saw a hilly, wooded and fertile landscape, still cared for by the small-scale farming communities that created them, and an extraordinary cultural continuity – in many villages, the family names are closely associated, historically, with these places – the same families have been caring for the land for hundreds of years.

Since that visit I have grown to appreciate and to love these landscapes and communities more and more.

It is rare, perhaps unique, in Europe to find well preserved and functional, productive landscapes at such a large scale. I was astonished to find how the grasslands are so wonderfully rich in wildflowers, and also in butterflies – with over two hundred butterfly species in Romania, compared to forty in the United Kingdom – other invertebrates and vertebrates, including important wolf, bear and raptor populations. These species all indicate the overall health of the whole ecology of these landscapes. And yet they are very productive. Studies carried out by the European Union show that smaller-scale farms in Romania, and more widely in Europe, are actually twice as productive per hectare than larger-scale farms. These special producers are farming with Nature, but they do need help to obtain a proper value for what they make, and a proper connection to the market. Given an integrated approach to rural development, these problems can be solved and, if they are, the communities will continue to prosper, and to protect wildlife-friendly farming.

All of us in the wider world have a lot to learn from Transylvania's farmed landscapes. They have spiritual as well as social, economic and ecological significance. Does this matter in today's more cynical age when there is such an obsession with "efficiency" and convenience? Yes, it does – because the essential point is that in these landscapes Man is still living in harmony with Nature – a harmony that has been largely lost in most parts of Europe, and with disastrous results to our environment. Here Man produces food in a truly sustainable way, without destroying Nature or fighting Nature, but in partnership with Nature.

□This is an important theme that I have been trying to stress for many years – to a chorus of scepticism. However, it would seem that the tide is beginning to turn and more and more people can see the costs of the industrialization of landscapes and food production, with a loss of the natural capital that sustains us all. Short-term gains will be followed by the collapse of natural systems in the longer-term. This is a collapse that can already be seen.

In contrast, the Transylvanian farmed landscapes offer many models of sustainable living, food production and biodiversity conservation. Conventional Nature reserves are probably not the answer to saving these special places for posterity, which require an holistic, landscape-scale approach that avoids creating islands of diversity surrounded by damaged lands. The existing richness of animal and plant life, certainly by comparison with other countries in Europe, demonstrates that farming and biodiversity can indeed survive together to enhance and complement each other.

There is no doubt that grassland is central to this farmed landscape. A long history and continuation of traditional, non-intensive management practices – mixed farming, little or no fertilizer input and low stocking densities – has allowed the great diversity of wildflowers and wildlife to survive. These low-input, permanent grasslands still possess an abundance of wild plants and animals that have disappeared from much of the rest of Europe. As you know far better than me, they yield meat, milk and cheese, and other commercial products such as honey, wild fruits and medicinal plants. It is a buffered, productive ecosystem.

The diversity of grasses and wildflowers, including numerous orchids, wild sages and other mint relatives, and twenty to thirty or more clovers, trefoils, vetches and other legumes, provides quality feed for farm animals. These grasslands represent more or less intact, traditionally managed ecosystems, including soils and soil micro-flora. Pockets of dry steppic grassland on South-facing slopes and the steep hummocks, or movile, that are a feature of the Saxon Villages, and damp grassland in valley bottoms with a rich wet meadow flora are especially rich.

They maintain both rich biodiversity and the “goods and services” of a healthy and stable environment. They reduce or prevent soil erosion, they lock up carbon and they soak up rain and slowly release clean water into wells, streams and rivers, providing both flood prevention in wet conditions and a secure water supply in dry periods. The mosaic of wildflower-rich grasslands and adjacent ancient woodlands generate income from tourism, being ideally suited to activities such as mountain bike trails, horse riding, walking, painting and natural history. Food products from this most healthy environment, of high quality and with a distinct regional identity, will increasingly attract consumers prepared to pay premium prices. Honey and jams made locally from wild meadow and woodland edge fruits are literally “bottled biodiversity”...

These farmed landscapes and the villages that support them are at the very heart of Romania’s rural economy and culture. Nevertheless, this valuable

ecosystem and its wild plants and wildlife are every bit as threatened as any in the modern world, even if the whole system appears substantially intact. The impressive legacy of the historical Romanian, Saxon and Székely farming communities should surely be integral to future economic growth, and conservationists can help local people and Nature by showing how to combine the best traditional farming practices with innovative technology. It would be a complete tragedy to lose that intangible sense of place, which can happen so easily. Instead, it is vital to ensure that an enhanced rural economy can again provide a good livelihood – and one linked directly to the landscape – for farming communities in Transylvania. And in a countryside that combines natural beauty and a living productive ecosystem...

I have been asked many times why I come so often to Romania, what is it that makes it so special, so attractive?

For me, the answer is clear: you, my Romanian friends; your natural and cultural landscape, your traditions, but also your capacity to innovate and change. What you are after centuries of history – your identity, and what you can do; the energy of change you can mobilize. This is what makes you special in the world.

Your architecture, your beautiful farmland, your biodiversity, your pastures, meadows and orchards, the mosaic of habitats and the diversity of your communities and traditions, in Transylvania and across Romania; all these, together, are a treasure – your treasure to the world.

It seems to me that, sometimes, you are not fully aware of all this. It is easy to forget, lured by the rhythm and challenges of our modern society. When you are looking to the future, please keep these values in mind. They are unique. When you want to modernize, to change, to transform – and Romania has so many things to do, to change, to modernize – I do so hope that you will be able to do it in a way that would give more value to your treasure; that will preserve your communities and your landscapes; that would bring what you are already into what you want to become.

I am always amazed by the exceptional creativity of your youth – in IT, research and innovation, creative arts. This is part of your treasure as well.

Your brand as a country is precisely this blend of values and authentic traditions; the architecture, the taste of your food, the ancestral fabric of your communities, of natural values; the unique biodiversity, the landscapes – as well as your capacity to innovate. This is what makes you special. This is why I always return to Romania and this is why a part of my soul is always here.

Modern life doesn't mean to forget the values of the past and to replace everything with new things, but to combine in a smart way the fundamental values of our cultures and traditions with innovation and new technologies – without severing the bond between human society and Nature.

Romania has a fascinatingly diverse and ancient history inherited from the

Dacians, and on which to build a life based on a harmonious relationship with Nature. During previous centuries, other civilizations enriched the local one with cultures, traditions and architecture based on the same principle of respect for a harmonious relationship with Nature. This is a richness which could be an asset for modern Romania. It would be wonderful, indeed, if schools and universities in Romania could cultivate the idea that Nature and living traditions are an asset for modern life. That is the only way to build a sustainable material and spiritual future – and one in which Romania would be uniquely placed to innovate without ever losing her precious soul.