

# Breite Ancient Oak Tree Reserve



Newsletter October 2007



## TO GRAZE OR NOT TO GRAZE?

Or, rather, to what extent to graze? Undoubtedly there was grazing on Breite in the past, but is it now the best – or only – way to prevent the encroachment of the surrounding forest and restore the wood-pasture habitat on Breite?

According to our experts, beyond the oak trees, the value of Breite is in its patchwork of plant associations, some of which may be averse to grazing. To conserve biodiversity and restore the habitats, a variety of measures are necessary, including clearing of hornbeam saplings, closing the artificial drains to retain humidity, hand-scything and, of course, some controlled grazing.

*For more details on this debate, please visit [www.breite.ro](http://www.breite.ro)*

## MANAGEMENT

A few days before the year's deadline, The Mihai Eminescu Trust and the Sighisoara Local Council submitted their proposed management plan for the Breite reserve. After twelve months of on-the-ground research and a wide public consultation process, our team – led by local biologists Cosmin Ioan Moga and Tibi Hartel – put together a 101-page document comprising a detailed geographical, biological, historical and cultural description of Breite, an evaluation of existing and future threats, and a set of proposed management measures. Once officially approved, a summary of the management plan will be made public on the Breite website, [www.breite.ro](http://www.breite.ro)

Last autumn the MET and the Sighisoara Forestry Office collected around 10,000 acorns from Breite and planted them in the local nursery. Around 5,000 saplings have come out and some of them will be re-planted on Breite, while others will be available for purchase. Any income from sales will be used to fund management measures.



A new set of protection rules was approved, explaining clearly which activities are permitted inside the protected area. The full text is available in Romanian on the website.

Immediately after receiving custody of the reserve, the MET employed two full-time guards

to watch the plateau and inform visitors about the new protection regulations. Since then, we have not had any severe cases of tree vandalism, although poaching and illegal woodcutting still go on in the surrounding forests.

We put up an information board inside the reserve and a sign on the main road between Sighisoara and Medias. Sadly, the information board was vandalised soon after being placed, but we are preparing a new, sturdier one.

The MET obtained a 11,000 Euro grant from German foundation Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung, which will help us close the artificial drains created in the 1980s and restore the water balance of the plateau.

Workers from Sighisoara and the nearby villages have been employed to clear the spreading hornbeam saplings – an urgent measure for the pre-



servation of the wood-pasture habitat with ancient oak trees created by Saxons in the Middle Ages. Without this, the surrounding forest would pervade the plateau and suffocate the old oaks. This year 14 hectares will be cleared, using manual mowers. We are happy to be able to offer a few jobs to people from surrounding rural communities, such as Saes.

Ornithologist, PhD student and local teacher Cosmin Ioan Moga has become manager of Breite, in charge of all administrative and scientific tasks.

## EDUCATION

Tuning young minds to the vital need of protecting natural ecosystems is a key goal of the Breite management team. Under the watchful eye of biologist and teacher Tibi Hartel, 215 pupils visited the reserve in the 2006-2007 school year, in seventeen groups. The older children made observations on wet areas, plant cover and oak trees, while the younger played in nature's midst.



Students from Sighisoara made scientific presentations about Breite at several national and international conferences: November 2006, Salgobanya, Hungary; May 2007, Pitesti, Romania; June 2007, Sighisoara, Romania.

## RESEARCH

One of the MET's main obligations as custodian is to gather, improve and enrich existing scientific data about the Breite reserve. Last year we focused mainly on field research aimed at producing a well-informed management plan and creating a point of reference against which to monitor future developments. The resulting management proposals were disseminated in academic circles, at the World Congress of the International Association of Landscape Ecology, 8-12 July 2007, where they received positive feedback.

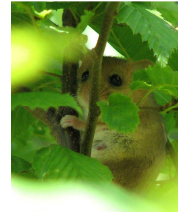


In February last year four Ural owls (*Strix uralensis*) were seen on an 800m stretch of the plateau. Although Romania is at the southern limit of these birds' geographic range, their density around Sighisoara is quite high.

A Hen Harrier female (*Circus cyaneus*) was seen hunting for prey on an October evening, in the northern part of Breite. This particular microhabitat is similar to the typical feeding and

breeding environment of the species: open marshy areas with high grasses. This proves Breite is not only an important area for locally breeding species, but also a vital source of food for passing birds of prey.

Though not protected in Romania, the dormouse makes a shy appearance among hornbeam leaves. This is a strong argument in favour of preserving a few patches of hornbeam on the plateau, providing shelter to a number of species.



Lowland hay meadows with *Alopecurus pratensis* and *Sanguisorba officinalis* are protected under European legislation. *S. officinalis* is still well represented in parts of the Breite plateau. Also known as Great Burnet, it is of critical importance for the endangered butterfly *Maculinea teleius*. *S. officinalis* requires careful management and may be sensitive to intensive grazing.

## PUBLIC AWARENESS

A comprehensive public consultation process was conducted throughout the year prior to completing the management plan. We held meetings with the main stakeholders, public and televised debates, a series of radio shows and articles in the local press, and a questionnaire was filled in by a representative section of Sighisoara's population. The questionnaire is still available on [www.breite.ro](http://www.breite.ro)

The UK's prestigious Ancient Tree Forum affiliated to the Woodland Trust, which advocates better protection and best conservation practice, specialist research and increasing people's enjoyment of ancient trees, has publicised Breite on its website, [www.woodland-trust.org.uk/ancient-tree-forum](http://www.woodland-trust.org.uk/ancient-tree-forum)

This autumn we produced a new information board with details of visiting regulations and a map of the plateau showing strictly protected areas, where entrance is only allowed by foot and in small groups.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Since taking over custody of Breite, the MET has spent around 38,000 USD for its management. This would not have been possible without the generous help of our donors and supporters.

Most of the funding came from the Packard Humanities Institute in California, with further contributions from German foundation Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung and Horizon Foundation of Holland, to whom we are most grateful.

We would like to thank all those who adopted oaks (for more details on this scheme please email [lholban@mihaieminescutrust.org](mailto:lholban@mihaieminescutrust.org)) and the experts who offered their knowledge and advice free of charge: George Peterken, Alexandru Ioan Toth, Bill Parker and Owen Mountford, to mention only a few.