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Illegal Logging in Rodna Mountains National Park, Northern Romania, October 2017

The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) has found clear evidence of illegal logging in Romania's second largest national park, linked to Holzindustrie Schweighofer, an Austrian timber giant. Romania's national parks encompass some of the last remaining wilderness areas in Europe, but they are under severe threat due to destructive commercial and illegal logging. Foreign market demand for timber, combined with a lack of significant traceability in Romanian timber supply chains, and the continuing failure of major timber buyers like Schweighofer to clean up their sourcing practices are leading to the decimation of Europe's last great forests.

Holzindustrie Schweighofer (Schweighofer), Romania's largest consumer of softwood logs, has been in the international spotlight for years for its extensive sourcing of illegally cut Romanian timber. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) stripped Schweighofer of its FSC certification in early 2017 following a detailed internal investigation. The timber giant has promoted its supposed reforms in recent years, but EIA's new investigation shows that the company's core sourcing practices have changed little. Schweighofer remains a key driver of illegal and destructive logging practices in Europe's most fragile habitats.

Romania's Rodna Mountains National Park contains the highest peaks in the Eastern Carpathian mountains, and is home to bears, wolves, lynx and the endangered chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra).* The majority of the park's forests lie in private hands, having been restituted to local town councils over a decade ago. Commercial logging is permitted in more than half of the national park, though Romanian law mandates strict controls over the conduct of such logging.

In Lala Valley in the east of the park, EIA found numerous examples of illegal logging. EIA identified a commonly used log loading site using the Romanian government's Forest Inspector website, inspectorulpadurii.ro, which shows real-time registrations of transportation permits across the country. At this loading site, EIA filmed piles of spruce logs of various dimensions stacked ready for pickup, and fresh tractor paths leading into the nearby forest. Following these paths led investigators to two separate active logging areas.



Map of cutting areas visited in Lala Valley, in the east of Rodna Mountains National Park

The loading site contained a handwritten sign showing the name of the company authorized to cut, S.C. TUC, and the harvest authorization number, 1098124, and duration, August 1st – December 1st 2017. This information is far less than what is required under Romanian law – most importantly, the type of harvest authorized was not listed publicly.



Informal sign posted at the log loading site in Lala Valley, Rodna Mountains National Park



Correct sign required at log loading sites in Romania

At the first site, closest to the loading point, EIA investigators found what appeared to be a "thinning" operation. Under thinning, a common procedure in managed forests around the world, loggers clear smaller trees to make room for larger trees to grow. At the first site, EIA found many examples of what seemed to be correctly done thinning of smaller stumps that appeared to have been marked prior to harvesting. However, EIA also found many larger fresh stumps that fell outside of standard thinning practices. In many places, sick or dead trees had been left standing, while cut stumps indicated larger trees nearby had been cut.



Site #1 in Lala Valley, Rodna Mountains National Park

On many stumps at this site, EIA found what appeared to be fake stamps, apparently made during or soon after harvesting, without any clear legible markings. The red paint on these fake stamps was just days old, and often contained wood chips, an indication that they were made close to the time of harvesting – not days or weeks before as is required by law.

Numerous Romanian forest experts have told EIA that illegal loggers often use a hammer and pipe to make such fake stamps. After weeks or months of weathering, these stamps can be difficult to distinguish from real stamps.



Fake stamp found on a freshly cut stump

One kilometer away, EIA investigators found a second fresh logging site, in the middle of a grove of spruce trees standing alone in an older clear-cut area. At this site, nearly all of the commercially-valuable spruce trees had been recently cut.



Site #2 in Lala Valley, Rodna Mountains National Park

Every freshly cut stump had a clear fake stamp on it – fresh paint, often covering woodchips, with no sign of letters or numbers. With one exception, all the stumps were hidden from the road below by a line of thin spruces that had been left standing. In the single case where the stump was visible from the road, it had been carefully covered with tufts of moss.


Freshly cut stump covered over with moss

Fresh tracks down the steep hillside indicated the recent dragging of large logs by horses. These tracks led to a recently-used loading area – a site where not a single official truck loading has been registered on the government's Forest Inspector website, as required by law.

Romania's government has recently claimed that the decrease in the large-scale clear-cuts often seen five or ten years ago shows that illegal logging is no longer a problem in Romania. While it is true that there are fewer cases of dramatic illegal clear-cuts in Romania in recent years, the kind of illegal and excessive selective logging documented by EIA and other groups still common throughout Romania's forests severely degrades the quality of these forests both as habitat for wildlife and as a provider of high-quality timber for future years.


Cleared hillside in Lala Valley, Rodna Mountains National Park

In spruce forests such as the one documented in this case, excessive and illegal thinning resulted in relatively large gaps in the forest cover. Romanian forest experts explained that during storms, heavy winds can enter these gaps, knocking down trees and widening the gaps. Windfalls allow forest managers to approve so-called "accidental" permits to clear fallen trunks – but in many documented

cases loggers cut nearby healthy standing timber as well. Over a short period, this steady degradation results in a full clearing of the forest area.

Romania's Forest Inspector website shows that at least 60 truckloads of wood were transported from this area in the second half of 2017. As the Forest Inspector website fails to show the end destination for timber transports, it is nearly impossible to know where most of this wood ended up. However, EIA has confirmed through sources that wood from this site was bought by Schweighofer, despite the company's claims not to source from Romania's national parks.

Romania's protected forests are under pressure from a steady demand for wood products, largely from foreign markets. Buyers must be particularly careful about where and how their wood is cut. In such a high-risk environment, full traceability is essential.

Romania's Forest Inspector website represents a revolutionary step forward in providing a degree of transparency into Romanian timber sourcing. Companies buying logs or lumber can check Forest Inspector to see whether their shipment came from the forest it was meant to come from.

However, significant gaps still remain. The website does not show the destination of timber, nor links between forest harvest permits and timber transport permits. Critically, there are over 1,000 independent log yards scattered across Romania. These so-called "depots" mix and sort logs according to species and quality, and cut logs into shorter logs to meet buyers' demands. Without full traceability of logs through these depots, buyers are unable to identify the forest origin of their log purchases. Consequently, any company buying logs from such a depot is fully exposed to illegal and unsustainable harvesting practices – in violation of European law.

Although logging in national parks can be legal in Romania, Schweighofer has long maintained that they refuse wood from these sources. However, the company still relies on third-party log depots for between 30-50% of their log sourcing in Romania. This looming gap in its sourcing practices exposes it to large amounts of timber from both legal and illegal cutting in national parks.

In its 2016 report, FSC's expert panel found "clear and convincing evidence" that Schweighofer had sourced illegal timber in Romania. The panel recommended that the FSC disassociate itself from Schweighofer – a recommendation the FSC's Board of Directors eventually followed in February 2017. The primary condition set by the expert panel for an eventual re-association with Schweighofer was the company would have to ensure full traceability of its timber "from the stand in the forest to mill gate including any timber that is purchased from third parties." Schweighofer's inability to do this for any of its sourcing from third-party depots, and its inability to trace wood from the loading site to the actual forest stand, make it far from fulfilling this basic and critical obligation.

Logging has been a mainstay of rural Romanian communities for centuries, and large parts of the country remain dependent on forests for their livelihoods – from timber extraction, for collection of mushrooms and other forest products, and from eco-tourism. The destructive logging witnessed by EIA in the Rodna Mountains National Park, both legal and illegal, threatens the future of Romania's forest communities, and the economic stability of these rural economies.

Despite years of international public scrutiny and piles of evidence of its illegal sourcing, Schweighofer continues to:

- buy timber from forests that are illegally logged
- source from national parks, contrary to its own publicly declared policy
- source significant amounts of wood from third-party depots, where the company lacks control over the legality or traceability of these supplies.

Until Schweighofer implements actual traceability for its Romanian sourcing operations from the forest stand to the mill, the FSC must not allow the company to carry its logo.