



## Forest Conservation: What Romania's Carpathia Project Shows About the Value of this Activity

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In the early 2000s, Romania returned millions of hectares of forest to private owners as part of post-communist land restitution. Despite the intended reinstatement of historic justice, the result, in many cases, was a wave of illegal and unsustainable logging across one of Europe's last great wild landscapes - the Southern Carpathian Mountains.

The Făgăraș Mountains, at the heart of this range, hold one of the largest contiguous areas of high-nature-value forest left in Europe, including an estimated 7,000+ hectares of virgin forest, alongside healthy populations of brown bear, wolf and lynx. Yet fragmented private ownership of restituted forest plots, combined with weak enforcement, meant that the economic logic for most landowners pointed towards logging and selling the timber, as well as using the cleared land for other activities that generated income.

This is the structural problem that carbon finance can solve. A standing forest delivers carbon storage, water regulation and wildlife habitat, but none of that shows up on a landowner's balance sheet unless conservation is paid for.

**Phase 1.** Foundation Conservation Carpathia (FCC) was established by a group of international conservationists and philanthropists in 2009 with a direct strategy of buying the forest to stop the logging. Since then, the foundation has purchased and placed under full protection 26,900 hectares of forests and alpine meadows in the Făgăraș Mountains. Over 8,000 hectares of this land have since been formally declared non-intervention zones within the Făgăraș Natura 2000 management plan or incorporated into the Piatra Craiului National Park core area.

**Phase 2.** Simply stopping logging was not enough on land that had already been clear-cut. Where forest had been felled and former owners had not met legal replanting obligations within two years, FCC began large-scale ecological reconstruction. At a single site, Groapele, the team first inventoried natural regeneration using more than 200 sample plots before deciding which native species and planting densities were needed to restore a forest structure resilient to climate change - rather than a fast monoculture. To date, the project has restored more than 1,600 hectares of degraded forest using over 4.1 million native saplings - beech, spruce, fir, alder, ash, elm, sycamore and yew among them.

**Phase 3.** From 2019 to 2024, the EU's LIFE programme provided €9.4 million in co-finance to the project "LIFE CARPATHIA" with a total eligible budget of €27.6 million. The programme's stated objective was to save at least 2,000 hectares of natural forest through land purchase and

conservation agreements, restore habitat conditions on at least 1,000 hectares, and create a minimum of ten nature-based enterprises employing more than 50 people.

**Phase 4.** Furthermore, to build a sustainable, long-term financing mechanism, FCC developed the Carpathia Forest Carbon Project, structured as a grouped project under the Verra Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) and the Climate, Community & Biodiversity (CCB) Standard, using the Improved Forest Management - Logged to Protected Forest (IFM-LtPF) category under methodology VM0012. This category is specifically designed for forests that have previously been logged and are now being protected and allowed to regenerate, which means the project explicitly covers both primary forest and naturally regenerating secondary stands recovering from prior disturbance.

The grouped project boundary spans 324,719 hectares across the wider Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site, including the Piatra Craiului National Park and the Leaota Mountains. The first Project Activity Instance (PAI) within this boundary covers 16 Romanian communities across 5 counties. The project was independently validated by Carbon Check India in 2024, with the validation report confirming that the project's community objectives focus on improving local livelihoods, raising conservation awareness, and developing a new economy based around conservation enterprises, ecotourism, and small-scale producers.

According to FCC's own announcement of the carbon finance initiative, the project scenario is expected to prevent an average of 57,050 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (tCO<sub>2</sub>e) per year from entering the atmosphere by prioritising conservation management with minimal timber harvesting.

FCC has been explicit that conservation cannot succeed without economic alternatives for the communities living around the protected area. 28 communes surround the Făgăraș Mountains with significant cultural and economic ties to the land. Through its Conservation Enterprise Programme, the project now supports 16 conservation-aligned local enterprises, for example, by providing technical support and initial grants. It sustains more than 110 jobs, and a local food hub sourcing from 30 local producers.

The project also maintains two rapid-response teams that have addressed over 800 human-wildlife conflict incidents, installed 92 electric fences, and distributed 63 Carpathian shepherd dogs to livestock owners to reduce predator conflict as large carnivore populations recover.

#### **The project's outcome so far:**

- 26,900+ hectares purchased and protected since 2009
- 1,600+ hectares of degraded forest ecologically restored using 4.1 million native saplings
- Carpathia Forest Carbon Project independently validated under Verra VCS + CCB in 2024, projected to prevent ~57,050 tCO<sub>2</sub>e/year
- 16 conservation enterprises supporting 110+ local jobs
- In December 2025, FCC was honoured with the German Order of Merit for its conservation work in the Făgăraș Mountains

#### **Why this matters for Ukraine:**

The Carpathian Mountains do not stop at Romania's border. The same mountain system extends into Western Ukraine, ecologically continuous with the forests FCC has spent more than a decade protecting in Făgăraș. The dominant species are the same: beech, fir, spruce, and sycamore.

The underlying economic logic is also strikingly similar. While Ukraine did not have post-communist forest privatisation as Romania did, Ukraine's land management patterns also

tempted landowners to log forest for short-term economic gain. There are up to 500,000 hectares of non-inventorised self-forested areas in Ukraine - this is spontaneously regrown wood on abandoned land plots originally designated for agricultural use. Not only does it make sense for landowners to log forest to carry out agricultural activities, but landowners are legally obliged to clear the timber from 'agricultural' lands to return it to designated use. In both cases, the standing forest is, in the absence of carbon finance, worth less to the landowner than removing it. In Ukraine, this dynamic creates a paradoxical situation where despite declared national policy aimed at increasing forest area, unprotected forest is being systematically cut down amidst a deep environmental crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. Financing conservation activities through carbon finance can make a difference to this pattern.

However, there are also important differences. FCC's model depends on buying land outright - a capital-intensive approach that required philanthropic capital and EU LIFE grants before any carbon revenue existed, and a model that cannot scale to the roughly 500,000 hectares of self-forested areas spread across Ukraine, mostly held by smallholders who are not willing to sell it. A conservation project that depends on outright purchase will always be limited by how much capital is available to buy land. This is precisely the gap that a different approach, working through voluntary agreements with existing landowners and a legal reclassification mechanism, rather than land purchase, is designed to close: a model built for scale across many dispersed plots rather than for one large philanthropically funded estate. What the Carpathia project demonstrates is that the destination of Verra-certified internationally credible forest conservation carbon finance in this exact ecosystem is achievable.

#### Key sources:

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- Rewilder Weekly newsletter (#108), summarising Carpathia's 2025 annual report: <https://rewilderweekly.substack.com/p/rewilder-weekly-108>
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