Uprisings and other observations from a visit to Poland

By Jim Cunningham

Introduction

In August 2010 I was privileged to join the European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) for a two week conservation trip to eastern Poland. Under the Leonardo da Vinci section of the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme, my travel and subsistence expenses, and those of my fellow group members, would be met in exchange for two weeks' hard graft in ankle-deep water, "managing" the vegetation of three different fenland sites.

I had never visited Poland before, but had plenty of reasons for wanting to do so.

Fenland conservation

My first was simply to gain more practical conservation experience. I had only recently completed a National Diploma in Countryside Management as a mature student at Kingston Maurward, my local agricultural college. I had studied freshwater habitat management, but wanted to know more. I wanted to improve my understanding of the threats to fenland habitats and the species they support, habitat management objectives and the management options available. I also wanted to develop my identification skills, practise my recently-acquired brush cutting and chainsaw skills and work as part of a like-minded team.

But my interest went well beyond that.

A sense of history, change and opportunity

At times I have read a lot of twentieth century European history. I also have an interest in geography. Visiting north-east Poland would take me close to Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, where, in the early months of the First World War, the German army won a series of decisive battles against the Russian army. At that time, this area was part of East Prussia. I had often wondered what the terrain is like and what it would have been like caught up in the heat of battle.

I also had some understanding of Poland as a battleground in the Second World War. How, in the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact of August 1939, the Germans and Russians agreed to divide the country along the Vistula River and subsequently invaded from both west and east; the inhumane treatment of the native population by the occupying forces, particularly the large Jewish population in the Warsaw Ghetto; the murder of large numbers of Polish army officers in the forests of eastern Poland; the impossible position of those fighting to gain a measure of independence for a Post-War Poland in the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944 and the subsequent obliteration of the city by German artillery; and the disappearance of the country behind the Iron Curtain for 45 years.

I wanted to stand on the banks of the Vistula River, walk in the woods, understand more about the Warsaw Uprising, visit Old Town, where after the War the Poles rebuilt as an exact replica the streets and buildings of the old Warsaw.

I also wanted to gain an understanding of the development choices the Poles are making now that they are a member of the EU and how these relate to the Poles' sense of their own history and culture, and to their obligations towards wildlife conservation under EU directives.

The landscape of Northern Europe

I wanted to see how flat Poland is. Nearly 30 years ago I lived and worked in Cambridge. Sometimes after work I would cycle to the pubs in the surrounding villages. One evening I remember cycling up the Gog Magog Hills, a chalk ridge to the south east of the city which rises to the majestic height of 75 metres. "If you travelled due east from here, you wouldn't hit this altitude again until you reached the Urals" said my friend Terry. Could Terry have been right? Yes through Holland; maybe across the north German plain; but what about Poland, Belarus and beyond?

Poland and the Poles

But perhaps my most important reason for wanting to visit Poland other than for the wildlife interest, was to get a better understanding of what Poland is and who the Poles are.

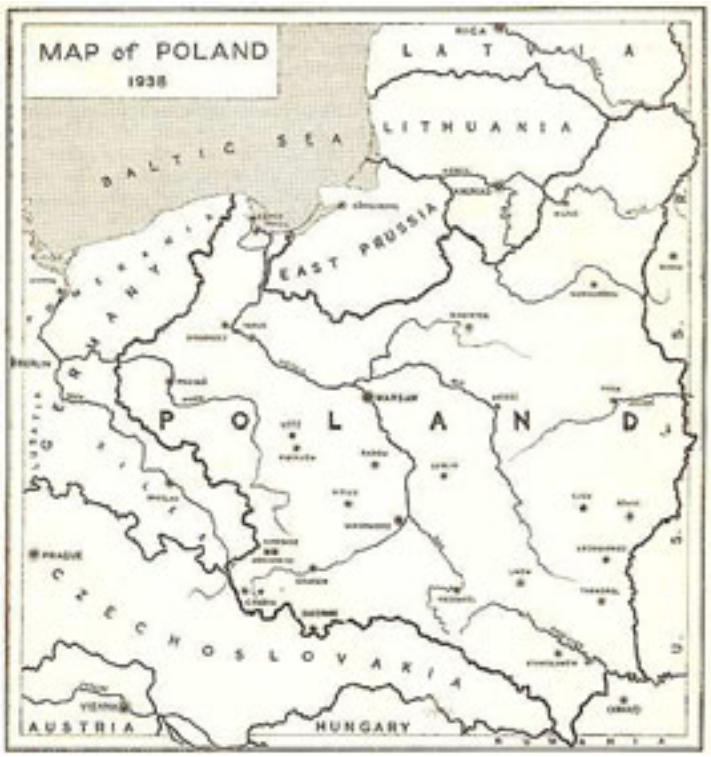
Living on an island with broadly stable borders and free from external invasion for nearly 950 years, these are not questions we tend to ask ourselves in Britain. And for most of us, our knowledge of European history tends to be dominated by the activities of the major political and economic powers. But Poland has not been one of these, at least not since the three or four hundred years up to the middle of the seventeenth century when it was territorially much larger and cut a broad swathe through eastern Europe from what are now the Baltic states to the shores of the Black Sea.

This position of strength was undermined by a century of invasions from the east, west and south which devastated the grain lands and resulted in demographic and economic collapse. Between 1772 and 1795 what remained of Poland was annexed and partitioned and it disappeared entirely as a sovereign entity until after the First World War. And the country which emerged after the First World War was then occupied for the duration of the Second World War.

Moreover, the Poland which emerged after the Second World War had very different borders. The centre of gravity was displaced to the west. Territory was lost in the east to Belarus and Ukraine, and in the north east to Lithuania, while territory was gained from Germany in Silesia, Pomerania and East Prussia to the west and north (see Charts 1 and 2).

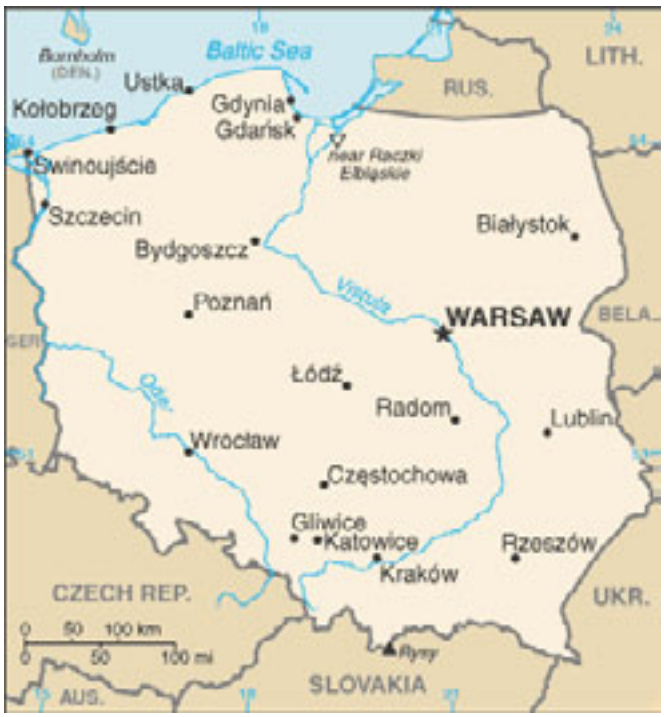
I have often wondered what these instabilities mean for cultural and national identity. How do the Poles view themselves? And how do those in "core" Poland view the Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians who were once their fellow countrymen, and the Silesians, Pomeranians and Prussians who are now Polish, but were once German? In essence, I guess, I am interested in knowing whether Poland and the Poles are defined by geography, language or culture.

Chart 1: Map of Poland 1938



Source: The Nazi Kultur in Poland, http://www.halat.pl/the_German_Kultur_in_Poland.html

Chart 2: Map of Poland since World War 2



Source: http://poland.embassyhomepage.com/poland-map.gif

Uprisings and fenland conservation

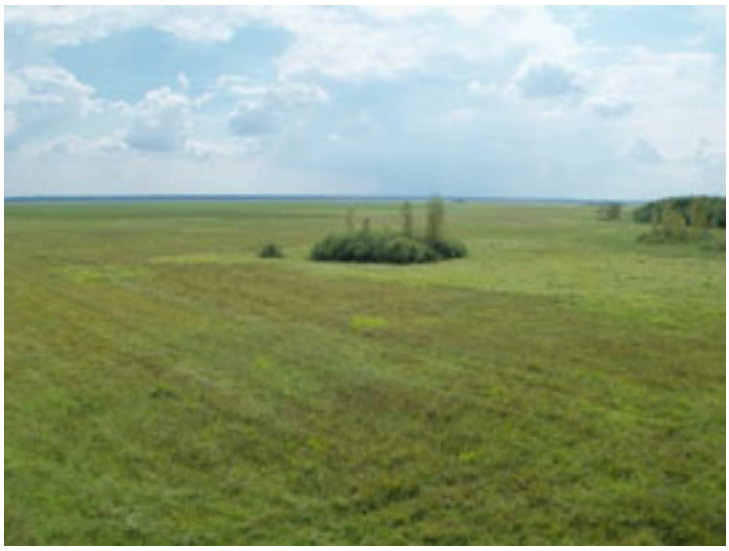
"Uprising" was a word commonly used by our hosts - academics from the University of Warsaw working through CMok, an NGO based in Warsaw and the Podlaise (the region in the far north east of the country near the Lithuanian border) dedicated to promoting research and management of the valuable fen habitats in eastern Poland.

In the context of fenlands, it related to the base-rich alkaline waters which well up from deep aquifers in the sodden peat, creating the fenlands which have traditionally supported a range of characteristic, and in some cases internationally rare, plants. Many of these are specialist mosses, but they include vascular plants including some rare orchids. Twenty four plant species found in Poland's mires are included in the Red Data book of internationally endangered species.

The major threats to the fenland species are drainage and the canalisation of rivers. These aim to make the land more productive. But the drainage has changed not just the wetness of the soil, but also its mineral composition. As a result, the soils have become more nutrient-rich (mesotrophic) and the traditional fenland species are increasingly being dominated by other, more aggressive, species. This is resulting in their demise and a loss of biodiversity. In some areas, such as the Bagno Całowanie (one of the three sites on which we worked), many of the specialist species are preserved only in the old wet peat cuts.

Originally, peatland covered about 4% of Poland. All but 16% of this has been lost, with living mires now covering just over 200,000 hectares. Some of these are spectacular in scale, such as the Biebrza Marshes which form a National Park. Those we worked on were much smaller.

Chart 3: The vast fenlands of Dluga Luka in the Biebrza Marshes National Park

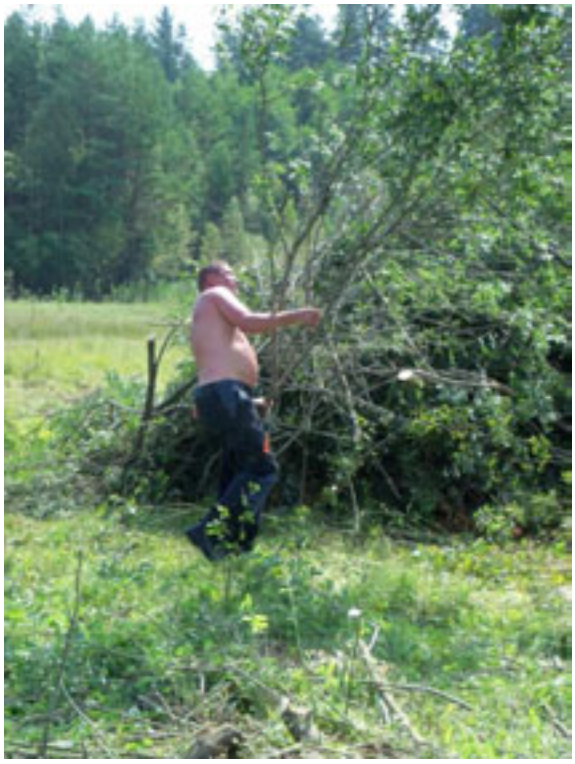


Our tasks on the three sites - Bagno Całowanie and Torfy Oronskie close to the Vistula River valley to the south east of Warsaw, and Sarnetki close to the Lithuanian and Belarusian borders in the far north east of the country – were to clear the encroaching biomass of unwanted vegetation resulting from the changes in drainage, nutrification and farming/management practices.

Chart 4: Cutting and dragging - removing unwanted biomass at Bagno Całowanie

We worked hard and had a lot of fun, even in temperatures of 35 degrees (50 degrees in the sun) and with mosquitos, horse flies and midges gorging on our blood. We enjoyed some exquisite bilberry buns, peaches and local delicacies. And looking at the before and after shots, we certainly made an impact.

Chart 5: Hard work in high temperatures - removing biomass from the fen at Sarnetki

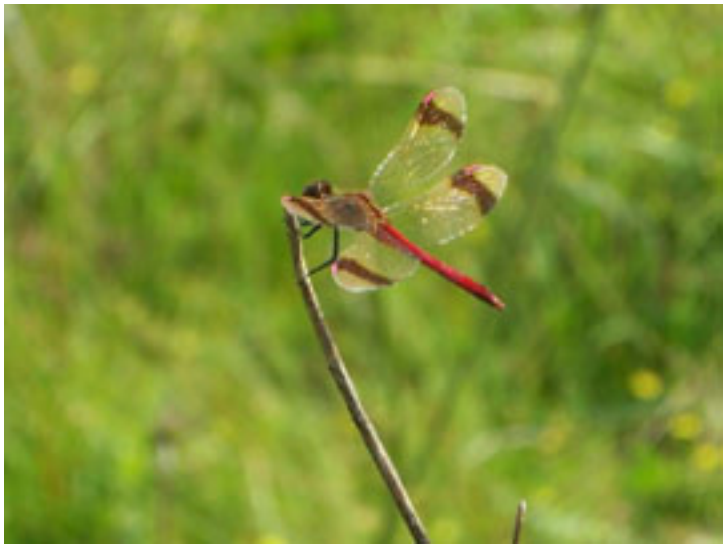


But did we make a difference?

Possibly. As a minimum, our efforts will have bought some time. It will take some time for the vegetation we cut to re-grow and this may give some of the threatened species a breathing space.

But we will have made no lasting difference unless we have helped to encourage the Poles to appreciate the value of their threatened fenland landscape and to get involved, either by following our example of voluntary conservation work or through changing farming practices.

Chart 6: Banded Darter at Sarnetki



Regarding the latter, we may have made some impact. The appearance of 15 volunteers from the UK and a couple of Poles working away for nothing in a swamp could not go unnoticed in a small community. And the farmer at Sarnetki was interested enough to ask questions and to find out that he could be paid to take on the management of his fen for the benefit of its wildlife through an EU agri-environmental scheme.

Money talks. But only time will tell. There are other forces at work, importantly the pull of the city on young people, rural depopulation and a declining affinity with the land.

Reversing the damage done by the drainage of the fenlands is a big job. It is one of the many priorities the country faces as it continues to develop along western economic lines.

Poland is an interesting mix of the old and the new. It is to be hoped that in the continuing bid to raise productivity to western levels it takes on the best and sustainable elements of western practice and recognises and avoids the damaging and unsustainable elements. With respect to its wildlife, these include an unquestioning drive for more intensive agricultural practices, particularly in areas of rare or threatened habitats.

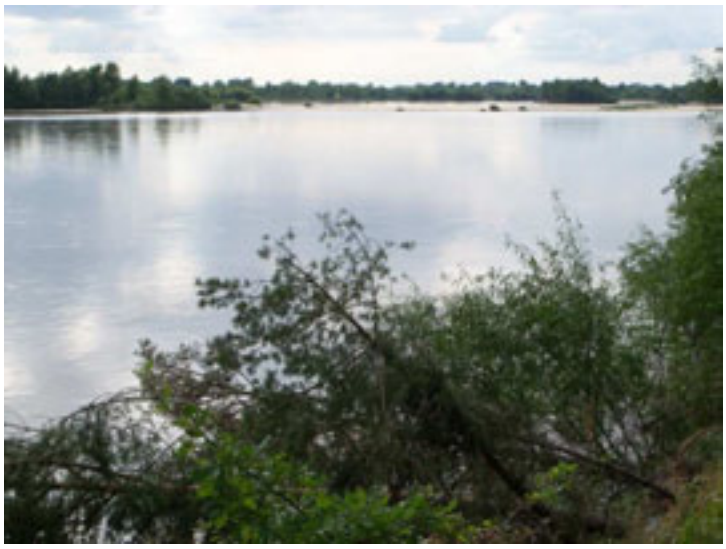
Landscape

I have spent a lot of time in Denmark, and am familiar with the landscape that the retreating glaciers of the Ice Ages left behind, but I had no sense of the scale of this in Poland.

The very southern part of the country, tight up against the Czech, Slovakian and Ukrainian borders, is mountainous, with the land rising above 1,300 metres. But most of it, and all the bits which I saw, is relentlessly flat. And I saw a lot of it. We travelled by train all the way from Britain, crossing the entire country at the same latitude as the Gog Magog Hills. The soil is a sandy glacial till from Sweden; the actual bedrock lies 300 metres beneath the surface.

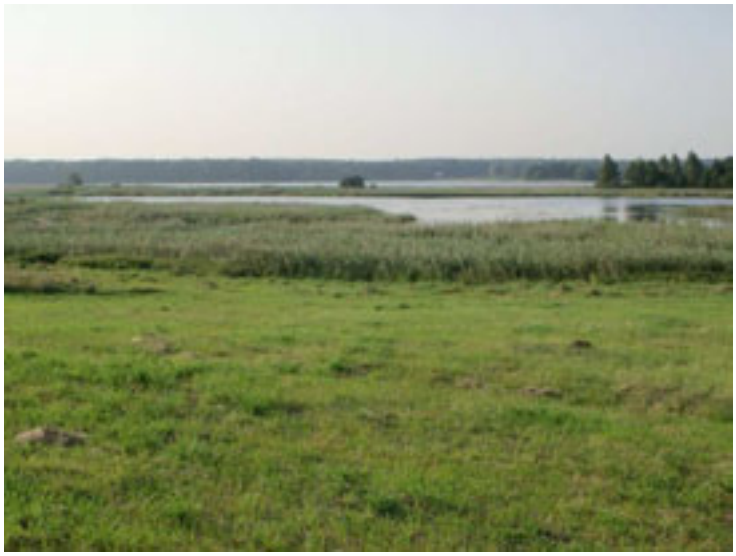
The landscape is drained by huge rivers on a scale we simply do not see in the UK. Standing on the banks of the Vistula and later taking a boat trip along it were, for me, given its importance in history, distinct highlights of the trip. Close to Warsaw, nearly 300 miles from the sea, the river is, in places, nearly a mile wide. It carries a huge volume of water, quite how much depending on rainfall in the Carpathian Mountains. There are no rapids or waterfalls on the river between Warsaw and the Baltic, and a 127 mile long canal, built in 1775, connects one of its tributaries, the Bug, to the upper reaches of the Dnieper, giving navigable access from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Chart 7: The Vistula River to the south east of Warsaw



Although the trip did not take me to the Masurian lakes, I got a sense of the landscape there from the lakes in the Wigierski National Park and close to where we worked on the Sarnetki fen. It was stunningly beautiful – large open expanses of water surrounded by mixed forest. Perfect for canoeing. The quality of the light and reflections in the lakes were magnificent. And the quiet and varied habitats made it good for spotting wildlife, including a black woodpecker and a fleeting glimpse of a pine martin. The water was warm, too. Twenty four degrees, which was just the job for a swim after the heat of the fen. Given the peace, and the logistic difficulties of navigating the terrain, it was difficult to imagine a similar landscape, only tens of miles away, as the centre for those major battles nearly a century ago.

Chart 8: The forests and lakes of Poland-Lithuania border country



I was struck by a number of other features of the landscape, too; the way in which cultivated land appeared more obviously than in the UK to have been won out of the ancient forest, with pockets of farmed land (varying in size from small to vast) and the settlements they supported surrounded by woodland; the lack of hedgerows and enclosures, with much of the farming being undertaken in broad strips and with cattle being tethered to control their movement; large areas of what was once agricultural land reverting to scrub as a result of depopulation and changing economics; the almost total absence of stinging nettles, particularly in the north east, indicating that farming does not rely on artificial fertilisers.

Chart 9: The wide, flat landscape of the Polish plain with few field boundaries

Was Terry right? Is there no higher land between the Gog Magog Hills and the Urals?

No. However good the story, the land does rise to between 100 and 200 metres on the Polish plain, although you would not necessarily be aware of this across such vast distances and relative to the curvature of the earth.

Poland and the Poles

The word “uprising” also occurred regularly in the context of Polish history.

I first became aware of this on our initial visit to the fen at Torfy Oronskie. We passed a monument to Tadeusz Kościuszko, a colourful leader of armed resistance in the early partition years of the 1790s.

Chart 10: Our host Ola by the monument to Tadeusz Kościuszko on the way to Torfy Oronskie

But he was not the only example in a country squeezed between dominant neighbours. Later in the trip I was able to visit the monument to the 250,000 or so Polish combatants and civilians killed in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. With simple hindsight, the action of the combatants appears folly. But faced with the prospect of being dominated by an unwelcome regime it offered the only, if very slim, chance of achieving some measure of independence in Post-War Poland.

Chart 11: Monument to the Warsaw Uprising, August 1944

And in my lifetime, I have seen the uprising of Solidarity in the Gdansk shipyards as the precursor to Poland gaining independence from the communist bloc.

That the Poles are proud and nationalistic was clear from my visit. But my understanding of the Polish view of Poland and what it means to be Polish was hampered by my inability in the language and the spectrum of people with whom I was able to communicate. These were very well educated academics aged between 25 and 35. They had an internationalist outlook, spoke extremely good English (a necessity in academic circles) and had an impressive range and depth of interests covering botany, ecology, history, geography and culture. This provided an extraordinarily encompassing perspective.

Łukasz Kozub, our impressively polymath host at Bagno Całowanie and Torfy Oronskie, took a long, balanced, view of Polish history. To him, the relative eclipse of Poland since the late eighteenth century needed to be viewed against earlier periods of Polish dominance. On balance, the Poles had given as good (or as bad) as they had got. I am not sure how representative this view is and whether it would be shared by older generations, particularly those with direct experience of difficult times.

I also sensed that to the younger Poles, to quote L P Hartley: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there", and that rather than dwell on the past, life is about looking forward and grasping the opportunities presented by the demise of communism and membership of the EU.

This may go most of the way to answering my question about Polish identity around re-drawn national borders. In the north, large numbers of Germans were evacuated from Prussia and Pomerania as the Russians advanced at the end of the Second World War, changing the balance of the remaining population.

But what of elsewhere, where movement across borders was severely restricted for decades and in some cases still requires a permit?

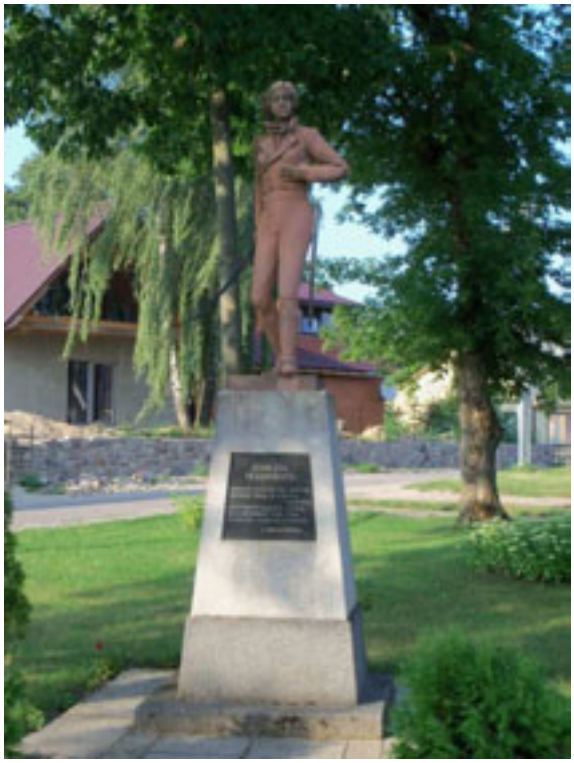
I had an interesting example which highlighted some ambiguities.

Towards the end of our visit, the group, accompanied by our host Paulina and her two children, crossed the border to visit the village of Kapcimiestis in Lithuania. Simply visiting Lithuania was another highlight of the visit. But two things hit home.

First, Kapcimiestis can have been no more than 10-15 kilometres from the Polish border, and had been part of Poland between the two World Wars. Yet Paulina was unable to communicate in Polish with the children and an elderly gentleman we met. And she was unable to understand them when they spoke Lithuanian to her. There was no obvious rapport.

Second, Paulina was clearly delighted to find, in the village square, a statue dedicated to one of her heroines – Emilija Pliateryté, who, as a captain in the Polish Army, played an important role in an uprising against the Russians in 1831. Today Emilija Pliateryté is known as the Lithuanian Jeanne d'Arc. So perhaps, despite changing political boundaries and language barriers, you cannot simply dismiss the past.

Chart 12: Monument to Emilija Pliateryté in Kapcimiestis, Lithuania



Summing up

My visit to Poland was a privilege and a great experience.

I enjoyed the conservation work and have a much better understanding of the commitment and resources it will take to restore fenland habitats to health.

I was able to gain a better appreciation of the landscape and its position in history.

I was able to ask myself a lot of questions about a country I knew little about.

I was able to work for a common cause with like-minded people and to enjoy the company of some very intelligent people, eat good food and drink good beer. Importantly, my curiosity to find out more was kindled.

I have mentioned two things which struck me from my fleeting visit to Lithuania. There was a third, and it is potentially the most important.

Despite Paulina's difficulty in communicating in Polish and Lithuanian, in trying to fill the void I discovered that I was able to converse in perfect English with the group of young lads. None was aged more than 10. I was astounded. You cannot get more backwoods than Kapcimiestis.

But perhaps this demonstrates the desire to take a broader view, at least amongst the youngest generations and those who teach them, and to put aside old divisions and to communicate and share understanding as widely as possible. And that, at least within the EU, international borders, however much redrawn in the past, matter increasingly little.

I hope this is so. I hope it means that we make informed choices about land use and make more which are environmentally friendly and preserve and strengthen biodiversity for the benefit of those English-speaking lads' generation.

My visit has raised my level of optimism that this could happen.

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All photographs taken by the author.

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The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN)

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