

Meanders of the Rospuda

The Rospuda Valley, one of Poland's most precious peat bogs and a Natura 2000 site inhabited by rare plant and animal species, grabbed the Polish media's attention this summer. The plan to build a dual-carriageway express road across this precious terrain was a top story for Polish newspapers and TV channels. Within several days, 150,000 individuals had signed a protest petition to the Polish President. These were by no means just fanatical "ecology-freaks," more concerned with flowers and frogs than with human life, but conscious citizens recognizing the absurdity of a road project stubbornly being slated for construction in the wrong place. The essence of the dispute is that this controversial by-pass for the town of Augustów could be built several kilometers further on, with comparable cost and deadline, avoiding the naturally precious terrain protected under EU regulations. That would likewise stand considerable chances of obtaining EU funding – unlike the variant running straight through the Rospuda Valley.

But what has the Rospuda got to do with the topic for this issue of *Academia*? Every time our politicians begin to argue that budgetary funding for research has to be cut, we are told that Polish science has to become more innovative, more geared towards applied research, less towards fundamental research. Such notions of self-financed science always spark a bit of soul-searching within me: perhaps I should have studied land drainage techniques or banking theory at university, rather than bird ecology? Paradoxically, the dispute over the Rospuda Valley and the network of express roads in northeastern Poland radically changed my views here. It turns out that even ecologists can not only practice applied science, but also demonstrate considerable innovativeness. Not in such ways as boosting the milk production of cows or inventing a new Nokia, but by authoring environmental impact assessment reports.

Such assessments need to be carried out for every sizable infrastructure project, especially when it could affect protected areas. Each is written by an expert scientist well-versed in ecology, and financed by the project investor. This is a somewhat dubious arrangement: it is hard to expect an investor to be interested in financing expert reports concluding that its projects are inappropriate on environmental protection grounds. Yet, noblesse oblige, there should be no presumption that experts will abandon their own objectivity as scientists. Nevertheless, sooner or later, every investor will always find an expert able to meet the challenge. And it was when reading the

environmental impact reports for the Augustów by-pass and several other investment projects that I recently understood that ecologists, too, can practice "applied" science, demonstrating "innovative" approaches to their work.

Such an unconventional approach to environmental protection was shown by the experts who proposed that the investor could compensate for natural habitats destroyed in the construction of the highway by cataloging endangered species of birds in the rest of the Augustów Forest. This approach is undoubtedly an innovation of considerable potential, and if it were consistently applied it could even revolutionize the insurance market, for example: it suffices to image the owner of a stolen car, who is told by his insurance company that in order to compensate him

for the loss it would count the traffic on neighboring streets. I also see considerable application potential in the opinion of another expert, who concluded that a string of 120-meter-tall wind turbines would not pose a threat to hunting eagles, because such birds have no difficulty in overcoming other linear obstacles in their hunting grounds, e.g. human-inhabited areas. The investor had after all paid for writing up a report, not for analyzing the research on eagle mortality rates resulting from collisions with wind power stations. Another scientist, writing about another express road project, concluded that it would not pose a danger to birds since they migrate

to Africa and back every year. I gather that birds' indisputable ability to fly was seen as protecting them from colliding with cars. It is a shame that the list of references cited in the report did not include well-known studies about bird mortality rates on roads, found to range from several to tens of specimens per km of road per year.

Seriously speaking, I get the impression that if the scientific community continues to ignore the issue of the quality of investor-funded expert reports, we will be faced with problems similar to the "Rospuda debate" ever more frequently. And it would be a great shame, because the notions of wealth and richness do apply not only to individual citizens, but also to the common wealth of our unique natural heritage. Far-fetched and "innovative" expert reports quite simply damage this heritage, and such damage is unfortunately irrevocable.



The scientific community should not ignore the issue of the quality of investor-funded expert reports

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