Citizen science for conservation in Eastern Europe: obstacles and opportunities for volunteer-based butterfly monitoring in Romania

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Abstract

The exceptional diversity of butterflies in Romania is well recognised, but has come under threat from global change. At present, data is lacking that reveals long-term population trends for most species. Volunteer-based monitoring (as practiced in several Western European countries) offers the opportunity to address this gap. It also raises public awareness of changes in the environment, and of butterflies and their conservation. To support the development of volunteer-based butterfly monitoring in Romania and to encourage citizen engagement, we initiated several activities. We created a network of potential volunteers and stakeholders in strategically important positions and brought them together in a workshop in 2012. In 2013, we presented ideas from this workshop to the Romanian Lepidopterological society. We offered several training sessions for interested citizens and organized a butterfly camp to raise publicity. A questionnaire completed by 40 participants at various of these activities revealed that the biggest challenge in establishing a volunteer-based butterfly monitoring in Romania is a high level of general mistrust within society, which is probably historically determined. A general lack of leadership, potentially caused by the destitute economic situation of possible supporters, further impedes potentially useful initiatives. We argue that the biggest opportunity to establish volunteer-based citizen science lies in supporting the ideas of motivated students and enhancing environmental education at schools. Projects aiming to support citizen science should be sensitive to local culture and historical particularities. To date, we have established 14 permanent monitoring transects throughout Romania. We are confident that with the vision of dedicated and enthusiastic regional coordinators, and with long-term support from several key organisations, butterfly monitoring will have a future in Romania.

Keywords: biodiversity, community engagement, education, participation, global change, land management

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