

British ambassador of Wild Romania, Charlie Ottley: "The forest law itself is not bad, but there is no will or funding necessary to enforce it"

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The British journalist Charlie Ottley is, since almost a decade, one of the most tenacious ambassadors of Romania's image in the world. Fascinated of the beauty and naturalness of our country, Charlie produces TV shows, writes editorials and reportages for the most prestigious media channels in the world, continuing to commend the grandeur and wilderness of the Carpathian Mountains or the biodiversity. Born 49 years ago at Winchester, England, Charlie became a friend of Romania, after he wandered to and fro in the world to find beauty. He was always the man looking for knowledge and the beautiful side of the nations. Double graduate in theology and philosophy, Charlie Ottley tried his hand at journalism, getting a diploma at the City University of London. After a short traineeship in London, he became the head of the correspondent office in Los Angeles of the media group World Entertainment News Network. Now, Charlie is constantly writing for The Daily Mail, Food and Travel Magazine and Vanity Fair.

Two decades ago, he established his own television, Forge TV, shooting the stories written for Daily Express. He traveled all around the world, producing a series of spectacular food TV shows. Thus, he discovered the "flavours" of Chilean food (Flavour of Chile), as well of food from Columbia, Peru, Mexico, Spain, Greece, Scotland or South Africa. The success of the series, broadcasted on Travel Channel, called a new series referring to food and travel,



titled Flavours of Chile. During the following 12 years, he produced similar series in Peru, Spain, Mexico, Scotland, South Africa, Columbia and Greece.

In 2011, Charlie Ottley arrived in Romania for the first time in the same purpose to discover the culinary tradition and nature. He was fascinated and until then he's focusing on helping to preserve the richness of nature in Romania. He produced the well-known TV series of documentaries Wild Carpathia, broadcasted in 110 countries and translated in 11 languages. In summer 2017, Charley Ottley launched the last episode of Wild Carpathia at United Nations Headquarters in New York, where he got a standing ovation from the officials of 193

countries and hundreds of world celebrities attending to the event.

At the end of the last year, the ambassador of the wild Romania, brought a house in Bran and intends to turn it into an authentic place of pilgrimage for British friends, which will become – as Charlie – “diplomatic representatives” of Romania.

1. You’ve been to Chile, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, South Africa, Scotland, Greece. In all these extraordinary countries you have made shows similar to the series dedicated to Romania. But our country attracts you the most. What is the reason?

I have visited many countries during my ten years as a Travel Channel presenter but all I was doing was encouraging other people to extend their carbon footprint, not doing anything particularly beneficial. When I visited Romania and witnessed the beauty of the Carpathian landscapes and learned about the destruction of this country’s natural and cultural heritage I decided to make a different kind of programme, one that might inspire positive change not just through tourism but through conservation as well. When you work so intensively with a country you get to know it, so I gradually fell more and more in love with Romania, despite all the problems you have here.

2. You have a few places that you prefer, many of them being natural wonders, such as the Nera Gorges, the Rarau, the Corbii de Piedra, the Delta. They are different and offer the image of a diversity palette. This means that you have perfectly sensed the potential of diversity and biodiversity that Romania has. Yes – I have always been very aware that Romania is many countries rolled into one. Borders are made by people but regions have their own individual identities that we should respect and protect. There is so much to see here, so many different landscapes that all possess their own special allure. We should be promoting them all rather than focusing on the same increasingly cliché destinations.

3. The tourism can become an engine of sustainable

development in the mountain area, where life support opportunities are more limited. I would like to do an exercise of imagination and to think that tomorrow you will be appointed to manage a project with this theme: creating an integrated system for implementing a type of tourism dedicated to the mountain area in Romania. What would be the main directions you were focusing on and the key points of this project?

The first thing I would do is designate areas of outstanding natural and cultural importance covering villages, historic towns, wilderness areas and then enforce strict architectural planning laws so these vital treasures don’t get ruined by ugly concrete pensions and Swiss style holiday houses. I would make it a legal obligation for additional buildings in these areas to be constructed using traditional materials and sympathetic designs. All new building plans would have to be submitted for approval by experts in cultural conservation working together with the local councils to ensure that we don’t destroy the historic integrity of rural communities so they can continue to benefit from tourism and not be ruined. This happens in the UK and ensures beautiful towns and villages remain visually intact. Secondly I would make all logging in National Parks completely illegal and fill in existing logging tracks and replant with na-



tive trees to prevent further soil displacement, surface run off and damage caused by erosion. Thirdly I would set up government subsidised timber depots for each community where local people can buy renewably sourced firewood, thus negating the need for thousands of rural Romanians to buy illegal wood from unregistered suppliers just to be able to heat their homes.

Fourthly I would clamp down on litter and fly tipping imposing substantial fines on people who dump their rubbish whether domestic or commercial in unlicensed locations. To this end I would also set up recycling centers across the country where people can bring their domestic rubbish for free so it removes the temptation to dump it illegally. I would also charge a parking fee for all national parks with proceeds to employ cleaners and pay for the installation of animal proof waste bins next to picnic sites and parking areas to incentivise people not to leave their trash on the forest floor.

Fifthly I would offer tax incentives to anyone wanting to open up a furniture factory and grants to train students and apprentices to learn skilled woodwork. This would hopefully reduce the need to export unprocessed timber and increase the value of timber leaving Romania which would allow us to harvest forests more sustainably.

Finally, I would offer free workshops for local communities to help them benefit tourism, whether by promoting local crafts or offering services or accommodation.

4. I saw that in Romania you were very interested in the fate of forests. What has aroused your interest, except for their beauty?

Very simply the Carpathian forests are the lungs of Europe. They sequester a large amount of carbon dioxide and play a vital part in protecting against global warming being the largest mixed forest left in Europe. They are also the habitat of over two thirds of Europe's apex predators and incredibly biodiversity. These forests should not belong to any one person or country as they are too important to the future survival of all of us

and subsequent generations. We must protect them or we are injuring ourselves.

5. A large part of the society, encouraged and stimulated by several non-governmental organizations that ensure that the state of the forest is not altered by illegality, considers that any logs transported on the roads come from deforestation. Foresters defend themselves and consider that the accusations are largely unfounded. In Romania, not many big wood thieves were judged. What do you know about this? How do you think and how this is seen in the UK, let's call it conflict, between environmental activists and forest professionals?

Most people in the UK know very little about what is going on here – what has become the biggest environmental crisis in Europe. The problem is we all know here that it is happening. Even the government admitted to the fact that over 30 million cubic meters of forest are taken illegally each year. That is besides the legal allowance. The sustainably limit for harvesting wood was recently calculated at around 10 million cubic meters so you can see the problem. NGO's are right to campaign against this, we should all be utterly horrified that it is still permitted. There is not enough will or funds made available to stop the illegal cutting. We could do it if we wanted to but no one wants to. All these small communities like the ones around Borsa know who is doing it. They turn a blind eye to the trucks rumbling all night past their windows and the police do nothing. As long as the paperwork seems to be ok then nobody can be bothered to enquire further. But having the paperwork and local approval often by corrupt officials does not make it ok. The big mills like Schweighofer and Kronospan are merely fueling the demand and as has been proven by the EIA report have often received illegally sourced timber. There needs to be an independent forest police, consisting of non-local people who are beyond bribery or intimidation and with the power to issue fines and bring those involved in illegal cutting to prosecution with crippling fines and jail sentences for those found guilty.

6. Are you aware of how forest management is done in Romania? What are the main coordinates for guiding it? Do you think that the pressure of the economic factor (the forest to provide as much money as possible) impedes sustainable development?

The forestry law in itself is not bad but there is no will or funding necessary to enforce it. I believe that uncensored and unforced deforestation is lethal to the sustainable future development of rural areas and will result not just in environmental catastrophe but widespread future unemployment.

7. What do you think would be the solution for Romania to preserve and manage the best protected natural areas? Could we be rewarded financially because we have the largest and most beautiful of Europe's primary forests (except Russia)?

We should be seeking grants from the EU to implement more intensive policing of natural resources. More money needs to be made available by the state with subsidies and rewards for sustainable practice.

8. There are several organizations and companies in Europe that are buying massive forest land in Romania. I claim that they do this for the intact preservation of the forest, although some are exploiting the existing wood. What do you say about this?

I only know about Romanian NGO FCC which has banned all hunting of large carnivores and banned all deforestation on its land in order to create the largest wilderness reserve in Europe, which is clearly a good thing. I am not aware of the activities of other organisations as described by the question but any company or group that allows for illegal exploitation of Romania's natural resources should be punished appropriately.

9. Large carnivores: the wolf, the lynx, especially the bear, have multiplied over the last three years, say the hunters. Conservationists continue to advocate for the „harvesting” of these animals. What do you think in this case?

There is no concrete proof of animal numbers. We can speculate that predator numbers are in-

creasing in some areas and decreasing in others. However, the hunting association are not a reliable source of information as they also stand to benefit from submitting an inflated census of carnivore numbers. We first of all need a neutral and independent body to accurately survey carnivore numbers before we conclude that their numbers are on the rise. If they are increasing then populations should be regulated, culled or repatriated by the government humanely and without room for profit or sport. It is also worth bearing in mind that just because we see more bears doesn't mean there are more bears. As we deplete their habitat we automatically bring them into closer proximity with humans thus creating the impression that there are more. It's more than a little ironic that first we destroy their home and then campaign to cull their numbers because we have shrunk their natural habitat through our own greed and destructive conduct. We also need to educate people as to how to access funds to compensate them for damage caused by predators so they don't take matters into their own hands.

10. În ce stadiu se află demersul tău de a-ți achiziționa o casă în România?

I am buying a stunning traditional house which I plan to renovate in a village near Brasov in between Piatra Craiului and Bucegi National Parks.

