



photo 1: © Michal Stránský



Czech Republic

Heritage Landscapes

Natural fortress

The **Bohemian Massif** occupies the major portion of the Czech Republic. It consists of a large elevated basin known as the Bohemian Plateau, which is encircled by low mountains and hills.

The **Šumava** Mountains, stretched along the Czech-Bavarian border in the southwest of the country, mark the high-point of the Bohemian (Šumava in Czech) and Bavarian Forest, with some 2,200 km², making it the largest protected area in Europe.

The **Ore Mountains** in the northwest trace the country's frontier with former East Germany, while the **Sudeten Mountains** in the northeast form most of the border with Poland. The western tip of the **Carpathian mountain** range touches the Czech Republic, tapering down into rolling hills along the Czech-Slovak border.



photo 2: © Michal Stránský

Moldau

Starting in the Šumava forest, the **Moldau (Vltava)** river flows down through central Bohemia and on through Prague before meeting the **Elbe** river, its course musically described by celebrated Czech composer Bedřich Smetana. The Vltava's Moravian cousin, the **Morava** river, drains the eastern part of the country, spilling into the Danube near Bratislava.

The Czech Republic has a large number of valuable wetland areas, including ten sites given special protection under the Ramsar Convention. They include the floodplain forests of the Morava and **Dyje** rivers in the border area in southern Moravia shared with Austria and Slovakia.

Cultivated land

In contrast to some of its eastern neighbours, such as Romania or Poland, most of the area of the Czech Republic has been relatively densely settled from earliest of times. The long and rich history of human settlement in the area has shaped not only the country's rich store of cultural heritage, but also left its mark on the landscapes and natural environment.

The human impact has in part been positive, serving to enrich the diversity of habitats and species. In the **White Carpathians**, settlers and shepherds gradually transformed the rolling hills along the Moravian-Slovak border into a brilliant patchwork landscape of orchards, forests, fields and flowering meadows with rare orchids that are

Area: 78,866 km² (approximately the size of Austria).

Terrain: Bohemia in the west consists of rolling plains, hills, and plateaus surrounded by low mountains; Moravia in the east consists of very hilly country, bounded by the **Carpathians** in the east. **Moldau (Vltava)** river flows south to north in the west, meeting the **Elbe (Labe)** river just north of Prague; the **Morava** river flows through Moravia in the east.

Elevation extremes: lowest point: Elbe River – 115 m, highest point: Sněžka in northern Bohemia – 1,602 m.

Land use: arable land: 41 %, permanent crops: 2 %, permanent pastures: 11 %, forests and woodland: 34 % other: 12 % (1993 est.).

Protected areas: 4 National Parks (110,304 ha); 24 Protected Landscape Areas (1,041,565 ha) – together comprise 14.6 % of Czech territory; about 1,500 small sites protected as natural reserves or monuments.

Population: 10,264,212 (July 2001 est.).

Capital: Prague – population 1,181,000. Prague's fame, however well-deserved, tends to overshadow the Czech Republic's many other attributes. This is unfortunate, since the rest of the country is not only packed with castles, palaces, and baroque churches, but also a rich natural heritage.

the area's hallmark – attributes that have earned the area international recognition as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The human impact on forests, which cover about a third of the area of the Czech Republic, has been less benevolent. As in countries further west, virtually all of the original forest cover has been felled, and much of it re-planted with fast-growing species, including spruce, canadian poplar and pine. Such non-native mono-cultures not only provide less favorable habitats for other species, but have also proven unstable given added pressures such as acid rain. Such unfavourable conditions led to sudden and mass deforestation particularly in the northern part of the country in the 1970s and 1980s.

As elsewhere in Europe, agriculture has had the greatest hand in shaping the landscape. When the Communists came to power in 1948, they set about transforming the structure of rural landscapes, abolishing traditional small and medium-sized farms to create large collective farms, transforming a checkerboard landscape into massive fields – ultimately, not unlike large parts of the USA or Western Europe. The industrial agricultural practices that were introduced, including reliance on chemicals, heavy machinery as well as amelioration of fields, devastated the diversity of plants and animals that long existed together with agricultural fields, in hedgerows or soil, and has contributed to recent catastrophic flooding.

Changes in agricultural practices since 1989, including reduced reliance on chemicals due to increased costs as well as re-planting of hedgerows and corridors, have lead to a gradual return of many birds, invertebrates, as well as other wildlife.

Iron Curtain, green veil

Outstanding natural treasures were, paradoxically, protected within the folds of the Iron Curtain. Many of the areas that for fifty years had been accessible only to border guards and wildlife have been turned into national parks after the removal of the curtain in 1989. They include the **Šumava** national park, Czech-Saxony national

park, and the cross-border **Podyjí-Thayatal** national park that is shared with Austria.

The system of nature conservation in the Czech Republic, including national parks, protected landscape areas, as well as other forms of protection, is generally well developed and implemented. The Czech Republic has pioneered among its Central and Eastern European neighbours the development of ecological network of nature areas and corridors that was developed in the 1980s and has been anchored in Czech law since the beginning of the 1990s.

The Czechs have also been front-runners in the development of private land trusts, which are usually managed by nature conservation organisations and are given official support and encouragement from the government. The tradition is reflected in the country's relatively good preparations for the Natura 2000 network of nature conservation areas, which is currently involving some 700 people.

Black Triangle

The process of industrialization that began in the late 18th century and made the Czech lands one of the most industrialized areas in all Europe had a significant impact on the natural environment. But the greatest effect occurred under the fifty years of the Communist regime, where concentration of industry combined with poor environmental standards and controls devastated some areas like **northern Moravia** or the infamous „**Black Triangle**“ shared by **northern Bohemia, Germany** and **Poland**.

Extensive strip coalmining turned large parts of the aptly-nicknamed region – an area that the German writer Goethe once called the most beautiful place on Earth – into moon landscapes; energy production and related industry, especially chemicals, cut life expectancy of people living in the area by ten years; the toxic mixture of SO₂ and other substances spewed by area smokestacks produced acid rain which denuded many of the hill-top forests of the region.

For further information contact:

Veronica Ecological Institute

Panská 9
602 00 Brno, Czech Republic

Tel: +420 542 422 750

Fax: +420 542 210 561

veronica@ecn.cz

www.veronica.cz

Useful links:

Czech Ministry of Environment

www.env.cz

Czech Agency of Nature and Landscape Protection (Agentura ochrany přírody a krajiny)

www.nature.cz

Administration of Protected Landscape Areas of the Czech Republic:

schko.ten.cz

NGOs:

Czech Union of Nature Conservation

(Český svaz ochránců přírody – ČSOP)

www.volny.cz/cdmcsop

Czech Environmental Partnership Foundation (Nadace Partnerství)

www.nadacepartnerstvi.cz

Friends of the Earth Czech Republic (Hnutí Duha)

www.duhafoe.cz

Fortunately, thanks to massive investments in cleaner technologies as well as closure of many plants, the situation has improved markedly over the past decade.

Photo 1: The Czech landscape has been shaped by centuries of human settlement.

Photo 2: Waterfall of the Elbe river in the Krkonoše Mountains.