

UNESCO urges Poland to stop logging ancient forest

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Poland's ancient Bialowieza forest is a world heritage site that includes some of Europe's last primeval woodland

UNESCO on Wednesday "strongly" urged Poland to stop logging the older parts of the ancient Bialowieza forest, a world heritage site that includes some of Europe's last primeval woodland.

The large-scale logging authorised by the Polish government began in

May of last year and has since drawn concern from environmental activists, scientists and the European Union.

UNESCO "strongly urges (Poland) to immediately halt all logging and wood extraction in old-growth forests," the World Heritage Committee said in a statement during its annual session.

The committee, which is meeting in the southern Polish city of Krakow this year, also called on "the state party of Poland to maintain the continuity and integrity of protected old-growth [forest](#) in Bialowieza forest."

Straddling Poland's eastern border with Belarus, Bialowieza boasts unique plant and animal life—including the continent's largest mammal, the European bison—as well as one of the largest surviving parts of the primeval forest that covered the European plain 10,000 years ago.

The Polish government has said it authorised the logging to contain damage caused by a spruce [bark beetle](#) infestation and to fight the risk of forest fires.

But [environmental activists](#) allege that the government's explanation is being used as a cover for the commercial logging of protected old-growth forests.

UNESCO urged Poland to "clarify third-party reports about logging targeting species other than those affected by bark beetle, which cannot be justified as so-called sanitary cuttings."

The European Commission for its part gave Polish authorities a "final warning" in late April to address its concerns over the forest or face being summoned by the EU's top court.

Environmental activists lauded UNESCO's statement: "This vote encourages us to continue our fight," Krzysztof Cibor from Greenpeace told AFP.

"But we have no illusions. This doesn't mean that the saws will stop tomorrow in Bialowieza. But one day it will end up happening, I hope, sooner rather than later."

The committee said it would send a monitoring mission to Bialowieza, while Environment Minister Jan Szyszko invited UNESCO delegates to the forest on Saturday.

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