

## REPORT ON 44<sup>th</sup> ERA MEETING 10-13 OCTOBER 2013

1. I attended this meeting held in Vrsac (pronounced Vrsatch) in Serbia as the LDWA rep after agreeing to pay half the costs of the meeting and travel.

This was an important year in the ERA as it included re-election of half the Presidium and the adoption of a new Constitution. The latter proposed the abolition of the Walking and Footpath Commissions and their replacement by work groups and 'know-how' sessions.

### 2. The Commissions (Final Meetings): The Walking Commission and the Know-how Sessions

As the longest serving chairman of the Walking Commission in the past, I always attend this, not least to try and act as an *éminence grise* and, mostly now it seems, as devil's advocate.

Most of the session (shortened to accommodate the 'know-how' sessions) was taken up with reports of the work groups set up over the last few years. Amongst these were:

-ECO Award This was set up at the request of Gaz de France, the ERA sponsor until this year, and seeks to award the walking organisation that does most for the environment. There were only five entries this year and the Presidium decided that none merited an award. After some discussion, it was decided to try and offer this for one more year and then drop the idea as Gaz de France will no longer be involved.

-Leading Quality Trails- Best of Europe: The idea of making an award to a footpath that fulfilled certain (basically German) criteria had now been going for some three years and this year three more were added to the three already so designated including the Kullaleden in Sweden. Given the criteria which are much more appropriate to the German system, demanding for instance waymarking every few kilometres on trees, boulders etc and our own system over which walking organisations have little say, I cannot see any footpath here meeting the requirements. It was reported that a slight increase in use had been noticed so perhaps the idea has some effect but.....

### European Voluntary Walk Leader Certification

This has been an ongoing bone of contention for many years and, despite the potential problems I together with Dave Morris (RA Scotland) raised last year (see my report), the work group has gone ahead, presumably with the blessing of the Members' Meeting, and declared that the system is now underway. It was listed as a topic for a 'know-how' session, led by Armand Ducornet, chairman of the work group but can be reported on here as Armand spent most of the session explaining the scheme and gave us a mere five minutes to discuss it!

The group has now declared the ERA to be 'the walking experts in Europe' and therefore able to say whether national training schemes meet their (again German) requirements. If approved (it is not clear by whom) the member-organisation (MO) can then say that their leaders are qualified to lead anywhere in Europe. MO's can submit their scheme to the ERA and if approved, they can by paying 200 Euros be given the blessing of the ERA for five years when presumably they will need to reapply.

As far as I know this has not received any official recognition from the European powers that be and with our own MLC, far more suitable for our conditions, already recognised for leading in Europe, and other training schemes in being here I cannot see any British MO taking up the idea.

### The Revised Constitution

The Constitution was revised from the first (1970's) version as long ago as the 1990's by three of us (Wolfgang Rabe, then the German ERA secretary, Hubert Ysebodt (B) and myself) working together so it was perhaps time to look at it again. The work group was led by Alois Stepphun, a lawyer and the German vice-president in the ERA. It should be noted that the ERA is registered in Stuttgart so must meet German legal criteria. This means that in matters of dispute, the German version takes precedence over any translated version.

Much of the new version remains the same but, as already stated above, this does not include any means of continuing or forming commissions. Instead these are to be replaced by work groups and 'know-how' sessions, chosen by the Presidium, something I for one find not very democratic and giving them too much control.

In the 'know-how' session, STF, the Swedish MO, brought up a proposal to limit any Presidium member to a maximum of two terms of office, meaning that nobody could serve more than eight years. This caused consternation amongst the Germans as they believe in very long-term chairmen and presidents (the national organisation had five presidents only in the first hundred years of its existence for instance!). It is worth noting that I had proposed this in the 1990's revision but it was blocked by the Germans who always argued for 'Kontinuität- continuity. Amongst other reps the idea met with a great deal of approval so STF were asked to present their proposal as an official motion for discussion at the Member' Meeting the following day.

The other 'know-how' sessions were mainly 'for information only' and are of little interest to us here.

### The Members' Meeting

This is what we would call the AGM and is the body that makes the major decisions for the ERA. It is in danger of becoming a rubber stamp, given the direction the Presidium seems to be taking. Of the 53 current MO's, 44 were represented, 3 from Britain –Alison Mitchell holding votes for RA and Ramblers Holidays and myself. Since Lis Neilsen (DK) became president, it is held in English which does at least get us away from the long-winded speeches we used to have when it was held in German

### Presidents' Reports

These are to be found on the ERA website ([www.era-ewv-ferp.com](http://www.era-ewv-ferp.com)) for anyone who wishes to read them in detail.

Amongst items of interest are:

1, From Lis Neilsen

A very busy year with many visits to various European countries including one to the RA in London. Benedict Southworth, newish CEO of Ramblers was present but he gave me no indication of how her visit was received nor indeed his overall impression of the meeting. I sat with him at the gala dinner and formed a very good impression of him.

Lis stressed the importance of team work and praised the members of the Presidium for their efforts during the year.

The European Walking Day -an attempt to organise Euro-wide cross-border walking and meetings on a particular day in September) had not met with a great deal of take-up this last year and it may have to be given up.

A Worldwide Organisation for Long-distance Paths has been proposed from an organisation in South Korea and the ERA has been invited. This is not a new idea as we have in the past discussed the possibility of creating a worldwide network for walkers similar to the one that exists for mountaineers (UIAA) and the YHA. It will be interesting to see how this develops.

The first Walk Leader Certificates had been granted and the 'awards' would be made at the gala dinner thus, according to Lis 'maintaining our position as 'the experts in walking in Europe' (sic).

Regional Meetings were taking place and more were planned. These aim to bring together the MO's from a specific region in Europe to discuss matters of common interest. An invitation to send 2-3 delegates from ourselves to the next northern meeting from 21-23 March 2014 in Copenhagen is attached.

This again is not a new idea but it could lead to some worthwhile developments and is to be welcomed.

ERA-EU Contacts are being actively sought after, basically for more money –again a welcome initiative. It needs to be remembered that the ERA has many MO's outside the EU and this may cause problems when asking for financial support.

The next Sponsorship comes into effect next year now that the Gaz de France sponsorship is ending. It is with *Kompass*, the map and guide publishers, and is very welcome although not as much in financial terms as the last one. It is certainly more in line with what the ERA is about and could have taken place many years ago if internal German politics had not blocked it!

In the Elections for 2015 the Presidium is proposing two new posts of 'assistant/advisor' (at present there is only one). This is another welcome step now that the ERA has so many more MO's. Lis requested that 'good candidates' should be nominated.

Reports from the Commissions

*Marcel Grandjean* reported on the items of the Walking Commission already detailed above.

*Uros Vidovic*, *Footpath* Commission chairman, reported on the state of the E-paths which seem to be progressing nicely.

New E-paths were discussed but no conclusions were forthcoming.

The Mediterranean Ring was presented and seems to be progressing well, certainly in Italy where *Mimmo Pandolfo*, ERA vice-president, is leading the project.

The E-1 is extending into Norway and will eventually be 2000kms long, going all the way to the North Cape.

#### Financial Report

Alison Mitchell (RA Scotland), the treasurer was able to give a fairly upbeat report (mainly due to the Gaz de France sponsorship) and the ERA's finances seem to be in good shape (see the website for details). The bookkeeping was approved by the auditor, Robert Strobl, former Bürgermeister of Brilon in Germany. This is to be welcomed as for a long time the ERA's financial position was very unsatisfactory.

#### New Member-organisations

Three new MO's were admitted. They are:

-Macedonian Mountain Sports Federation: deals with footpaths in their region and is trying to link footpaths across the Balkan countries.

-Trans Carpathian Council: This is located in the south-west part of the Ukraine and is looking to develop cross-border cooperation. It has a project: the Carpathian Tourist Road, a multi-purpose trail which is in need of development. Interesting for us eventually perhaps is the creation of a footpath register for the region, another of their projects.

Croatian Mountaineering Association: With 30 000 members, 152 huts and 6500Kms of trails, this seems to be a very important addition to the ERA membership, not least because it seeks to establish the E6 and E12 in their region.

All these new members were admitted *nemcon*.

#### Presidium Elections

These take place every two years, half the presidium 'retiring' but under the current constitution, nothing stops them from seeking re-election. This was the case again this year so re-elected were:

Lis Neilsen (DK) as President (that is the chairperson).

Armand Ducornet (F) as second vice-president

Alison Mitchell (GB) as treasurer.

### The Constitution (see website for details)

As reported above, the STF (Swedish MO) had made a proposal that limited the terms of office of all the members of the Presidium. The proposal, now in the form of a motion was presented by Ingemund Hägg, professor emeritus from Uppsala university, very politically aware but unfortunately not very politically astute. After a great deal of wavering and consultation overnight, he had finally come up with a reasonably worded motion that limited the maximum terms of office, in particular the office of President, to two years. His revelation of the proposal at the 'know-how' session the day before had given the 'German camp' led by two politicians, Robert Strobl, (president of his local club for thirty years!) and Ulli Rauchfuss, current president of the German RA, time to marshal their forces and present a counter proposal quite simply leaving the terms of office as unlimited, presumably with the blessing of the present incumbents of the Presidium.

After a short discussion a vote was taken with the following result:

For the Swedish proposal:	22
Against:	20
Abstentions:	2

As a change to the Constitution requires a two-thirds majority, the motion was lost even though there was a slight majority, not least because one abstainer later told us that he had had strict instructions to vote for the Constitution as it stood but in essence agreed with the proposal.

The Constitution was then passed in its entirety and, once accepted in German law, will be followed by the ERA for the indefinite future, enabling members of the Presidium to stay in office for as long as they want.

I detail this event because in the past, the ERA has had presidents who were in office for nine years, an Austrian who spoke in Viennese dialect (not always understood by Germans!) and a Czech who spoke bad, halting German although he was more effective than the former. I can only hope that the Presidium takes note of the strong pressure the vote revealed for a limit to the time anyone can stay in office and acts accordingly.

### The Foundation

Set up many years ago as an investment fund with capital from MO's, this has not really been a great success, no surprise given the economic climate. This year it made a profit of 1950 Euros and has a surplus of 450 Euros. This is not very much, given the amount invested but no British MO is involved (no invitations to join were sent) so we would do well to steer clear of it.

The Eurorandos (European Rallies) take place every five years so the next one is planned for 2016. It will be held in Skane a fine walking region in Southern Sweden. We had a presentation and it does look very good. More details will emerge next year.

### Next Meetings

2014: Vogtland in Germany A region north of Munich and near the Czech border.

2015: Slovakia

### Comments

I have always tried to be upbeat about the ERA meetings as it seems in essence to be a necessary and useful organisation representing walkers' interests at European level. However, the direction the Presidium is taking I now find a cause for concern. Now that the commissions have gone, there seems to be no place for open discussion and the Presidium seems to be seeking –and getting- more and more control of what should and should not be. Lis is very hard-working and very committed but she has been described by Alison Mitchell as 'something of a control freak'.

The make-up of the Presidium is also becoming more and more a cause for concern, certainly in the case of Marcel Grandjean (CH) and Armand Ducornet (F). Marcel is in a curious position as he does not have the backing of the Swiss and lives in Germany. He only retained his position as chairman of the Walking Commission because of his language skills but this has now gone so it will be interesting to see what happens next. Armand Ducornet is a retired teacher of German from Alsace so it is no surprise that he favours German ideas (witness the Walk Leader scheme). I sat with the French contingent at the gala dinner and was intrigued to find that they are not very enamoured of him. Even so, Marcel and Armand seem to have formed a kind of triumvirate with Lis within the Presidium and I do not find this at all healthy. As regards Alois Stepphun, the recently elected German vice-president who was absent because he was ill, it is too early to tell.

All in all, we come back to the dominant influence the Germans have in the ERA and, despite the good things in their way of walking, known to many as 'the German style', they do not admit that any other style is any good and they do act as a block on any projects and ideas they do not like. Perhaps the formation of a worldwide organisation will bring more balance but I understand that the UIAA has this problem too!

Perhaps too it is time for somebody else from LDWA to go to an ERA meeting to see what they think. The regional meeting proposed for March next year in Copenhagen next year would be a good opportunity.

Arthur Howcroft

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