One of the most exceptional grassland complexes in terms of both diversity and extent is found in the south-western part of the White Carpathians ( Bílé Karpaty) in the south-east of the Czech Republic. Most of the mountain range, some 750 km², is a Protected Landscape Area within Czech legislation (since 1980) and has a counterpart on Slovak territory. The area is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (since 1996) and was awarded the European Diploma of Protected Areas by the Council of Europe in 2000. In its south-western part, 2,174 ha of species-rich grasslands are protected in 12 nature reserves, including buffer zones, as well as within the Natura 2000 network (CZ0624072 – Čertoryje, CZ0724090 – Bílé Karpaty).

The White Carpathian wild flower grasslands are extremely species-rich. Numbers of vascular plant species amount to 70 in an area of 1.5 × 1.5 m and up to 103 in an area of 24 m² (Klimeš, 1997), although only a small portion of plants actually flower (Klimeš, 1999). They include a large number of rare plant species, which includes a total of 24 orchid species (cf. Tlusták and Jongepierová-Hlobilová, 1990; Jongepier and Jongepierová, 1995). Accordingly, numbers of butterfly and other insect species are also very high. This diversity is explained by a combination of several favourable factors – historical development and geographical position, presence of calcareous soils, abundance of ecotones, and long-term sustainable management.

Abiotic features
The White Carpathians ( Bílé Karpaty) are a mountainous area stretching out along the border between the Czech Republic and Slovakia over a length of some 80 km. The basic geomorphological element of the White Carpathians is one, locally two, parallel mountain ridges and is roughly oriented SW–NE. Elevations range from 180 m near the Morava River to 970 m above sea level on Mt. Velká Javořina.

The area is based on flysch sediments that comprise layers of sandstones alternating with clay- and marlstones, which in the south-western part are mostly calcareous in nature. Characteristic of flysch sediments are frequent landslides, which have modelled the landscape, continuously eroding hillsides and giving rise to springs and small marshes. Flysch soils have poor water retention, hence rainwater flow off is mostly superficial. Cambisols are the prevailing soil type of the area. Locally Chernozems occur and, along streams, by rivers and at spring sites, Fluvisols are also found. At higher elevations these change into Gleysols. The south-western part of the area, which is the subject of this case study, has a mostly warm climate (average annual temperature 8.9 °C), but higher up against the ridge (southwards) the climate becomes moderately cool and on Mt. Velká Javořina it is cool (average annual temperature 6.8 °C). Average annual precipitation varies from 550 mm (at low altitudes) to 950 mm at the highest altitude. Rainwater drains into the Morava River and partly into the Váh River in Slovakia. Streams may dry up in periods of summer drought.

Cultural history
Isolated archaeological finds prove that man has been present in the area since the Early Stone Age (Paleolithic), but more intensively so since the Late Stone Age (Neolithic), some six thousand years ago, when the first farmers and shepherds appeared in the area. They entered from the lowlands on both sides of the White Carpathians and it is believed they settled predominantly on steppe land. Since that time, man has spread across the area clearing woodland for the creation of pastures and arable land. During the Roman occupation and at the time of the migration of nations, a certain decline occurred in the number and size of settlements.

From the beginning of the 10th to the 13th century, the area functioned as a broad buffer zone (Confinium) between the Morava and Olšava rivers, the south-eastern boundary of Great Moravia, and the Váh river, being the north-western border of (Upper) Hungary. The area therefore remained practically untouched including all its natural barriers such as marshes, streams, impenetrable forests, etc., and stayed almost uninhabited. Penetration of man into the mountain area resumed in the Middle Ages. The first mentions of human settlements come from the 12th to 14th century, but the beginning of their formation goes back to as early as the 5th millennium BC. Naturally, almost all of them are situ-