



**Closer  
to Nature**

## PRESS RELEASE

### **ČSOP Student Competitions in Natural Sciences Becoming Ever More Popular**

#### **A new annual round of the contests has gotten underway**

(Prague, September 7, 2015) As the new school year has gotten underway, so too have the 21st annual Environmental Olympics and the 44th annual "Golden Leaf" - nation-wide life-science contests organized by the Czech Union for Nature Conservation. Just two years ago, around two and a half thousand children stepped up to the plate in the Golden Leaf contest, but this spring, they already numbered more than four thousand, i.e. interest has grown by almost 70%. Add to this the Environmental Olympics (which are geared towards high school students, are more specialized, and have smaller teams of contestants), and we are talking about more than four and a half thousand participants from the ranks of children and youth up to 18 years of age. This figure does not include those participants in the Environmental Olympics who compete in the rounds held at individual schools, for whose numbers there are as of yet no precise statistics. New entities who would like to organize their own rounds have already expressed an interest as the new annual round is picking up pace, so that the upward trend will presumably continue.

Both ČSOP contests look back on a long tradition, but only over the past two years have the organizers witnessed a surge in interest. In the case of the Golden Leaf contest, schools have for quite some time been increasingly eager to participate, even though the contest was originally designed for scouts and youth clubs. Today, no less than three quarters of all participants already come from lower secondary and academic high schools. As the numbers of contestants and of host organizations grows, there is also a very leisurely increase in the amount of financial support that goes towards these contests, though it must be said that sponsoring still seriously trails behind actual costs. The current situation is a rather realistic reflection of the state of Czech public education: the contests' survival hinges upon the selfless work of hundreds of enthusiasts and volunteers, whose reward is only symbolic, and who in turn rely on the help of sponsors. The general partner of the ČSOP contests is NET4GAS. "We have great respect for the committed work of volunteers and professionals from the ranks of the ČSOP, and are delighted by the growing interest of kids in these contests. Supporting environmental education, and raising awareness of how important it is to protect our natural wealth are an integral part of our program NET4GAS Closer to Nature," commented Zuzana Kučerová, who is in charge of the program at NET4GAS. In addition, both the Golden Leaf contest and the Environmental Olympics enjoy the support of the state enterprise "Lesy České republiky" (Czech Forests), and of two government institutions: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Environment. This year, the contests have gained a new supporter on a project basis, namely, the Czech State Environmental Fund.

Both the Golden Leaf contest and the Environmental Olympics teach kids something which today's children sorely lack: the ability to collaborate towards a common goal. This is because the contestants are in fact entire teams – something which is found rather less often in the field of

natural sciences. In and of itself, this offers both children and mentors a broader range of motivational tools than in the case of one-on-one contests. At the same time, practical tasks that must be resolved "in the field" are an integral part of the contests, giving children the opportunity to come into hands-on contact with nature, as opposed to the mediated experience from their computers at home or at school. The tasks are designed with current issues in mind, and contest participants thus may try their hand at finding solutions to the same issues that occupy the minds of adult scientists, ecologists and full-time conservationists. The topic of this year's Environmental Olympics is Sports, recreational activities and nature conservation – a topic that is at the forefront of concern not only of national parks and nature preserves, but also of cities and recreational centers, small towns, and micro-regions.

In spite of the frequently proclaimed interest of the state in promoting and expanding the STEM fields, actual support is lackluster, especially in certain regions. Decisions are made at the level of regional government, and the differences in approach could indeed not be more pronounced. "While one region may grant no financial support to the Golden Leaf contest at all, or at best offers to provide diplomas for the contestants, the organizers of the regional round in another region may rely on financial support with almost absolute certainty, thanks to a better system of rules for grants. In the Vysočina Region, for instance, the whole arrangement works marvelously," said Jaroslav Síbrt, the nationwide contest coordinator from the Youth Division of the ČSOP. "When you look at it from the national level, you see big differences among the individual regions. Some regions support their regional round with a couple of thousand crowns, while others support a similarly-sized round with a subsidy of tens of thousands. Then there are still regions that actually donate zero, even though numerous schools and clubs across the entire region regularly send two hundred children (say) to the contests," added Síbrt.

The growing popularity of the ČSOP contests is pleasant news for their organizers, and a promise for the future. But whatever may be behind the increased interest in these events, it also signals the need to address the issue of further fundraising, so as to amass the necessary financial means for broadening and developing both the Environmental Olympics and the Golden Leaf contest. After all, the maximum capacity of many rounds of these contests has already been exhausted, which may well pose a problem within the context of the relatively small and limited non-profit sector in the Czech Republic. For now, the issue is still manageable - thanks to the support of partners from the commercial sphere, who have given the ČSOP contest organizers the necessary level of certainty, because they have more flexible grant rules and greater interest, stemming from a rather general awareness of social responsibility. But only the overall support extended to these contests in future years will show whether there is sincere interest in this country to raise young natural scientists, and whether these well-established contests will be able to actually grow in all respects.

For more information on the contest, please visit [www.zlatylist.cz](http://www.zlatylist.cz) and <http://www.ekolympiada.cz>.



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The **Czech Union for Nature Conservation** is a group of people who love nature and share an active interest in nature conservation. It currently has close to 7,000 members, some of whom hail from the ranks of professional naturalists, but others are enthusiastic volunteers, while some are adults and others are children. Everyone can help. Do you love nature? Then join us! For more information, visit [www.csop.cz](http://www.csop.cz).

**NET4GAS** is the Czech Republic's reliable and safe gas transmission system operator, pursuing the responsible policy of protecting nature and the environment for current and future generations. The commercial operations of NET4GAS are very closely connected with the issue of nature conservation, and it is this fact that underlies the firm's long-term strategy of corporate philanthropy that has been implemented within the context of the NET4GAS Closer to Nature programme. Since 2007, NET4GAS has been the general partner of the Czech Union of Nature Conservation, while the firm also supports various other projects for which the slogan "Closer to Nature" is at the heart of sustainable development. For detailed information on the sites that have been opened to the general public, and for lots of additional interesting information related to nature, please visit [www.blizpriode.cz](http://www.blizpriode.cz).