



SIXTH MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

“ENVIRONMENT FOR EUROPE”

BELGRADE, SERBIA
10-12 October 2007

**PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF MOUNTAIN
AREAS IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE**

submitted by

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

through the Ad Hoc Working Group of Senior Officials

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT



UNITED NATIONS

PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF MOUNTAIN AREAS IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

Submitted by The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as lead country with the support of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), Balkan Foundation for Sustainable Development (BFSD), Italian Ministry of Environment, Land and Sea and the European Academy Bozen/Bolzano (EURAC)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The objective of this paper is to identify opportunities and innovative approaches for the protection and sustainable development of mountains which are applicable for the SEE region, starting from experiences and available best-practice examples within the region (such as sustainable tourism, sustainable local development and their links to nature conservation) to the legal instruments for cooperation in Mountain regions, which are described in detail in the Category I paper "Cooperation and Frameworks for the Protection and Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions in Europe" submitted by UNEP.

2. To some extent, this document will also analyze achievements in relation to specific projects implemented in recent years and report on future planned activities that aim to promote the protection and sustainable development of the SEE Mountain Areas or its parts (e.g., West Stara Planina, related ENVSEC interventions led by the respective partners, mining and climate change related to mountain specificities, Carpathians with respect to Serbia)

INTRODUCTION

3. The Balkan Peninsula is regarded as one of the richest regions within Europe when it comes to natural habitats, with unique mountain areas, karst phenomena, lakes and rivers ranging from the Adriatic Coast up to the Dinaric Alps and Carpathian Mountains. The Balkan mountains stretch across South Eastern Europe, crossing 8 national borders, including those of the EU member states. The high mountain ranges or massifs of South Eastern Europe are characterized by a great deal of biological diversity. They represent one of the six European biodiversity hotspots, with particularly high number of relic and endemic species, habitat of a remarkable flora and fauna, multitude of people and rich conglomerate of cultures and religions.

4. With the exception of Greece, the countries of the South Eastern Europe (SEE) have experienced periods of high instability, war, economic crisis, transition towards a market economy and EU integration over the last twenty years. Due to political situation, especially after the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and the poor economic conditions in neighbouring countries, the remain natural assets are under severe threat and require support both on national and international level.

5. The region is under strong economic development pressure, and the need to generate income and improve the living standards of the population is leading to the growing exploitation of natural resources. Development is considered both a threat and an

opportunity to the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of South-Eastern Europe. Among the major current and future threats are: habitat fragmentation or destruction, over-harvesting, illegal logging, deforestation, inappropriate management methods, unregulated development, unregulated exploitation of natural resources, etc. Problems such as depopulation, poverty, high unemployment rate, environmental degradation, communication and infrastructure difficulties and the political and economic marginality are common to a large number of mountain areas in the region.

LEGAL INSTRUMENTS FOR COOPERATION IN MOUNTAIN REGIONS OF SOUTH EAST EUROPE

6. Against this background, the idea to cooperate for the protection and sustainable development of mountain regions/areas in South-Eastern Europe has been initiated in order to ensure the conservation and a sustainable future of the region. An official request to UNEP for assistance in facilitation of the intergovernmental consultations aiming at an enhanced regional cooperation for the protection and sustainable development of mountain regions in SEE, was sent by Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in December 2004. The Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning initiated this idea being aware of the fact that efforts to protect, maintain and sustainably manage the natural resources of the South Eastern Europe cannot be achieved by one country alone and requires the cooperation among all the countries in the region.

7. The experience of UNEP, the Italian Ministry of Environment and Territory and the EURAC in facilitating the Alpine-Carpathian experience-sharing process and, together with the REC, in the framework of the Carpathian Convention, an existing tool for the sustainable development of mountain areas, could serve as a potential model for cooperation in the South East European region. The Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia also acknowledged that adequate involvement and participation of NGOs and other civil society groupings in such a development process is important and so appointed BFSD – Balkan Foundation for Sustainable Development – to take further part into this initiative.

8. At the meeting “Sharing the experience – Capacity Building on Legal Instruments for the Protection and Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions in South Eastern Europe”, held in Bolzano, Italy in December, 2005, the participants from the SEE countries concluded that their Governments may consider to develop a regional legal functioning framework for co-operation between relevant national authorities and regional/local stakeholders.

9. Consequently, the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia hosted the Intergovernmental consultation on the “Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions in South East Europe”, in Pelister, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, May 12-13, 2006. Participants reviewed a study conducted by Balkan Foundation for Sustainable Development (BFSD) on the “Assessment on the current situation and needs of cooperation on the protection and sustainable development of mountain regions/areas in South-Eastern Europe (Balkans)”, expressed themselves in favour of a legal framework for

cooperation in SEE and recommended that a draft text of a legal instrument be prepared for negotiation.

10. Supported by Italy and in collaboration with the REC, UNEP's partner in the Environment and Security Initiative and contributor to many aspects of preparatory work, a third meeting was organized in the EURAC Bolzano on 3-4 November 2006. The meeting completed an expert reading of the draft convention text and suggested that all SEE countries join in a negotiation process. Consultations are underway to organize the next negotiation meeting in the region, with a view to advance the agreement and conclusion of the proposed framework convention.

11. The Belgrade Conference 2007 is expected to be a landmark event for facilitating and launching the formal process of cooperation for the protection and sustainable development of mountain regions in South Eastern Europe.

12. The inclination to cooperate on the protection and sustainable development of mountain regions/areas in SEE is undisputable. But whether this cooperation would evolve into a new legal instrument could be a matter of discussion. One might argue there is already a proliferation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements tackling biodiversity and related issues, but the lack of implementation in most of the SEE countries is evident. If only these were adequately enforced, no additional instruments would be needed. The question is "would a new tool be an overlap with already existing signed or ratified agreements, or would it be an added value, providing new opportunities?"

13. Looking at the other mountain ranges in Europe, such as Alps and Carpathians, there are some similarities between these two and the South East European mountain ranges. All three stretch over several countries, fulfilling important ecological functions and are vital catchments' areas. All three mountain systems are also showing high biodiversity and endemism, and they are home to many different cultures and they are facing human pressure on natural values.

14. The Alpine and Carpathian Conventions are the only conventions dedicated to the protection of mountains currently in effect. Several aspects of the Alpine and Carpathian Conventions could serve as an example for the conservation and sustainable development in the South Eastern Europe. Lessons could be learned, leading to more efficiency of such regional instruments. A positive example is the Alpine Network of Protected Areas that has been created between the administrations of alpine protected territories (13 national parks, and many nature parks, biosphere reserves, etc.). This network has been recognized by the Alpine Conference as an official tool for implementing the Alpine Convention. On the other hand, when one looks at certain sectors, such as tourism or transport, – although they are important economic factors for all of Alpine countries – they present enormous problems in this Western European mountain system, e.g. transit routes in the Alps. In the SEE region, the anthropogenic pressure is still lower than in the Alps, therefore there is the opportunity for prevention and sustainable development to avoid the mistakes made in the Alps. The main challenge for the future is to prevent, rather than to cure. Although each of the mountain systems has its own specificity, looking at the strength and the weaknesses of the Alpine and Carpathian Conventions, taking the positive examples, adapting them to the situation of the South East European conditions, and using the lessons learned from the

problematic sectors should be considered to ensure both conservation and sustainable development.

15. The present situation in this region still impedes any efforts by regional and international actors to promote and advance the necessary reforms required by the EU accession process, while compromising the prospects for security and development within the geographic borders of the European continent. Improved legislation for nature conservation and protected area designation and management is a future challenge for the South Eastern Europe. Throughout the region, legislation on the (re)distribution of land and rights needs to fully consider its effects on biological and landscape diversity. At least as important as appropriate legislation are the regulations, plans and resources to implement it. These are lacking to a greater or lesser extent throughout the mountains of most of the South East European countries.

Transfer of Carpathians Experience to Mountain Areas in South Eastern Europe

16. As the regime for cooperation on protection and sustainable development of the Carpathian mountain area, facilitated through the entry into force of the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Kyiv, 2003) has developed, the experience of some Carpathian states can be transferred to the South Eastern European mountain areas. This is especially true of Serbia, the country which has territory both in the Carpathian region and in the South Eastern European mountain area. Although Serbia had not yet ratified the Carpathian Convention as of the time of writing, it has participated in the work of Convention bodies and has benefited from some of the assistance provided in this context.

17. SEE countries can benefit from projects such as those falling under the CADSES project on the Carpathians funded by the European Commission, the Carpathian Environmental Outlook developed by UNEP, and the outputs from the REC and European Academy Bolzano: diagnostic audits (i.e., regional and national assessments of the policy, institutional and legislative set-up for implementation) and the Handbook on the Carpathian Convention for Local Authorities. On the local, transboundary level, the experience of Serbia in developing a transboundary biosphere reserve at the Golden Gates of the Danube together with Romania can also provide a valuable example in Serbia's relations with its neighbours in SEE.

IMPROVING TRANSBOUNDARY BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

18. One of the most beautiful and untouched areas of wilderness in Europe is the mountainous region on the borders of the South East European countries. It represents one of the most important areas for transboundary co-operation in protected area management worldwide. The size of each SEE country is relatively small compared to the main habitats in the region – the spacious mountain chains spread from the Northern Adriatic coast to Greece and further to the Black Sea. Often the mountain ridge forms the border between the countries.

19. Due to unsustainable economic activities in agriculture, forest management, illegal logging, hunting, husbandry and collection of medicinal plants, as well as uncontrolled construction, biodiversity loss has been recognized as a security risk in a number of South

East European countries during the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative consultations in the region (Belgrade 2002, Skopje 2004, Podgorica 2006). Acknowledging that the good technical cooperation in the field of natural resource management can contribute to stability and sustainable development of the region, one of the aims of the ENVSEC Initiative in SEE is to encourage regional cooperation in transboundary mountain protected areas in the region and creation of protected areas in border regions, and to organize capacity-building and exchange with other mountain regions of Europe.

20. The development of a network of mountain protected areas in the region, which could serve as a regional platform for cooperation and capacity building, is one of the aims of the ENVSEC project in SEE. Emphasis is given to transboundary protected areas, as they potentially provide a wide range of benefits, such as safeguarding important areas of biodiversity divided by political borders, a more effective management of shared ecological units or migratory species (e.g. large carnivores), the preservation and enhancement of cultural values and their promotion, strengthening or re-establishing of good relations with neighbouring states.

21. Eight such transboundary mountain areas have been proposed by the SEE governments so far for support of the concrete action in or exchange of experience: Sharr - Shara Mountains and Korabi (Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/Albania/ The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Bjeshket e Nemuna - Prokletije Mountains (Albania/Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/Montenegro); Orjen – Snjeznica (Bosnia and Herzegovina/Croatia/Montenegro); Vlahina – Malesevska – Belasica (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia/Greece/Bulgaria); Sutjeska – Durmitor - Tara river valley (Bosnia and Herzegovina/Montenegro); West Stara Planina (Serbia/Bulgaria); Tara Mountain – Drina gorge (Bosnia and Herzegovina/Serbia); Osogovsky Planine – Ossogovo (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia/Bulgaria).

22. However, a number of cross-border initiatives have been launched so far by a number of institutions, local and international organisations. These cross-border projects are focused on resolving concrete problems and have led to an improved level of communication among project partners and stakeholders, better cooperation, local ownership and commitment. This paper describes the activities undertaken at some of those, as well as the concrete cooperative initiatives, such as “Peace Parks”, Dinaric Arc Initiative and European Green Belt.

EXAMPLES OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF MOUNTAIN AREAS IN SEE

West Stara Planina

23. West Stara Planina represents the most western section of the Balkan Mountain Range – Stara Planina – covering an estimated area of 4000 sq. km., located on the border between Bulgaria and Serbia, with a population of about 200,000. It is largely underdeveloped, facing problems of depopulation and an increasingly aging population, which mostly lives in rural settlements. At the same time West Stara Planina is extremely rich in biodiversity and geological diversity, with many protected and endemic species and unique geologic forms.

24. West Stara Planina's agricultural traditions are rich, and much better preserved than in others parts of Europe. As a traditional sheep-breeding area the region is famous for its sheep products and crafts: the famous Pirot kachkaval and the Chiprovtsi and Pirot wool carpets. Particularly on the Serbian side, extensive agricultural methods using primitive breeds that have been abandoned elsewhere are still dominant, making the Serbian side of the mountain a center of agro-biodiversity.

Transboundary Cooperation: REReP project

25. In the framework of the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme for South Eastern Europe (REReP) under the Stability Pact, a project implemented by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), with financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, helped populations living on both sides of international borders in South Eastern Europe to increase cooperation on the management of shared natural resources at a number of cross-border sites. Among them was the mountain area of West Stara Planina shared by Bulgaria and Serbia. This area has become a positive example of cooperation that can serve as a template for transboundary cooperation on shared natural resources in other parts of SEE and in EECCA.

26. The activities had as a priority the effective transboundary management of shared natural resources through raising awareness on both sides; supporting networks of partners, responsible for the management of natural resources; environmental education activities and supporting nature protection initiatives. A major focus of the project was to build the capacity of local stakeholders active in the areas of ecotourism, environmentally friendly agriculture and local crafts, and to support partnerships and the exchange of experience between small business, local authorities, and NGOs, and to promote good practices. A book on "Transboundary cooperation through the management of shared natural resources" has been published by the REC under this project.

Transboundary Cooperation: Peace Parks, Festivals, Euroregion, Trails

27. In 1996 Bulgaria and Serbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the creation of the Transboundary Peace Park of West Stara Planina. In 1997 the Nature Park "Stara Planina" was established on the Serbian side (132,000 ha). On the Bulgarian side, while there are 17 protected areas with national and international significance, including the Biosphere Reserve of Chuprene, these represent only small fragments of the region. The first steps towards designation of the "West Balkan" Nature Park only took place in 2003. In March of that year, following biodiversity studies, a proposal for a 133,000 ha nature park on the Bulgarian side of the border was submitted to the Ministry of Environment and Waters. In 2006 REC lead the process for completing the documentation for the designation of the "West Balkan" Nature Park and holding public hearings. As Bulgaria is now an EU member state, the area designated on its territory will become an integral part of the EU's Natura 2000 network. In the meantime, on the Serbian side of the border, while the park has been established for ten years, steps are now being taken to designate the areas as a biosphere reserve.

28. Local civil society groups and government institutions have started a dialogue to define common management approaches. A number of regional networks have been established for joint planning and exchange of information and knowledge on topics such as biodiversity

conservation, sustainable tourism and agriculture. Capacity building has taken place at the local level to assist communities in project preparation, sustainable tourism and agriculture, and environmental education. Technical support has also been provided to local institutions, helping in the establishment of a common biodiversity database. Small grants targeted to NGOs have provided a catalyst for continuous informal exchanges between the countries, including joint cultural events and manifestations.

29. One of the most important kinds of partners in terms of cooperation on transboundary management of shared natural resources is municipalities. There are 11 municipalities in the region: Dimitrovgrad, Knjazevac, Piroć and Zajecar on the Serbian side and Belogradchik, Berkovitsa, Chiprovtsi, Chuprene, Georgi Damjanovo, Godech, and Vurshetz on the Bulgarian side. A Letter of Intent for Transboundary Cooperation was signed by 11 municipalities, seven from Bulgaria and four from Serbia, in Knjazevac on 8 July 2005, leading to the establishment of the “EUROREGION of Stara Planina” on June 20, 2006 under the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (Madrid, 1980). The agreement was a result of several years of joint forums and roundtables for discussing problems of joint interest from both countries and initiating joint activities. The letter of intent stated: “Our common vision for development of West Stara Planina is its economic and social revival, attracting and retaining the young, and economic prosperity based on the transboundary development of environmentally friendly tourism and agriculture and preservation of nature and culture.” In the framework of the agreement, working groups on ecotourism, environmentally friendly agriculture, culture and infrastructure were formed. As a result of these meetings contacts were established and initiatives were started between teachers, foresters, non-governmental organizations, media and local authorities on both sides of the border.

30. Through technical support, joint analyses of water and forest resources and biodiversity as well as socio-economic trends were undertaken by authorities on both sides of the border, resulting in a much clearer picture of conditions throughout the whole region. This helped to define common priorities for preserving the mountain area and promoting its sustainable development as well as creating transboundary partnerships. A differentiated approach taking into account the major land uses in the two countries led to establishment in Serbia of a multi-stakeholder working group on agriculture aimed at the development of environmentally friendly agriculture and organic farming, and development of four local environmental action plans (LEAPs), while the focus on the Bulgarian side was on ecotourism (see below). Technical support aimed at the NGO community focused on exchange of experience, training on project cycling, strategic planning, and biodiversity-related matters.

Environmentally Friendly Tourism

31. Serbia and Bulgaria have established a network of tourist information centers in West Stara Planina. Local stakeholders identified environmentally friendly tourism as one of their priorities, and they received the support of the REC to plan and develop tourism initiatives. Bulgarian actors developed their Regional Ecotourism Action Plan, which became part of the five-year National Ecotourism Strategy, and started to implement some of the measures identified. The 150 km long West Balkan Tourist Trail was developed in 2004 passing through the most remarkable landscapes in the mountain and 10 small settlements. In 2005 local municipalities developed light visitors’ and information infrastructure along the trail

and trained local stakeholders in small settlements on how to start up their tourist businesses. With the support of the project a network of 6 tourist information centers has been established along the trail. In 2005 new tourist information centers (TIC) were opened in Chiprovtsi, Chuprene and Gorni Lom, and in November 2006 the town of Vurshetz hosted the first transboundary meeting of TICs. In 2007 REC started a GEF small grant project aimed at developing biodiversity-based tourist products along the West Balkan tourist trail and developing interpretative programs for them.

32. Also in 2005 representatives of tourist information centers and municipalities from Bulgaria and representatives of municipal tourism organizations from Serbia established the transboundary Working Group on Tourism. They set up joint priorities and as one of their first initiatives they launched the West Balkan Summer Festival program, which advertises jointly the major summer cultural events in all municipalities (www.westbalkanfestivals.com).

Environmentally Friendly Agriculture

33. While the Bulgarian side took the lead on tourism, Serbian stakeholders became forerunners on agriculture. Local stakeholders received support in identifying possible directions for developing sustainable agriculture development in Stara Planina region, and demonstration centers for rural development and agriculture were established in Serbian municipalities. In the municipality of Dimitrovgrad, a unique Interactive Farm was set up promoting local animal breeds to tourists and students. The project supported initiatives on linking agriculture, the production of crafts and tourism. Examples include the demonstration center for natural coloring of wool for carpet weaving in Chiprovtsi and regular support to the organization of the Fair of Balkan Agro-biodiversity and Rural Heritage in Dimitrovgrad.

Transboundary Dialogue

34. The process of transboundary dialogue began with a bottom-up process involving “Get Everyone Involved Meetings” (GEIM) in 2001-2002. First contacts were established and joint problems discussed among municipalities, teachers, farmers, small businesses, foresters and NGOs along the Bulgarian-Serbian border. This was followed by joint priority setting in 2003-2004. Local stakeholders formulated priorities for cooperation. The resulting priorities included development of environmentally friendly tourism and agriculture, revitalization of local traditions and joint management of natural resources. Joint action plans for cooperation were subsequently developed, and transboundary working groups were established in tourism and agriculture.

35. People living on both sides of the border have jointly organized annual Bulgarian-Serbian summer festivals beginning in 2002. These typically include around ten traditional cultural events on both sides of the border. Festivals have been organized in Pirot and Belogradchik with the participation of more than 200 people including craftsmen, media, local authorities, students and representatives of non-governmental organizations. The festivals turned into a traditional platform for transboundary dialogue and promotion of the mountain’s values. Two joint summer camps on “The crafts of West Stara Planina” took place in Chiprovtsi, July 2004, and Pirot, July 2005, with the participation of 30 children and Bulgarian and Serbian trainers in carpet weaving, pottery, natural wool dyeing, traditional cheese production, and traditional folklore. Three fairs on the theme of agrobiodiversity and local traditions

were held in Dimitrovgrad, presenting local breeds of domestic animals from Southeastern Europe and traditional products and crafts from Bulgaria and Serbia.

The Shara mountain

36. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is committed to the conservation and sustainable use of its natural resources with its clear policy to increase the share of protected areas in the country. The pivotal point in this respect is the new Law on Nature Protection and its implementation in practice. According to the official data based on scientific research, instead of the current 69 protected areas covering 7.16% of the total country area, there should be approximately 109 protected areas of different categories covering around 18% of the area in The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

37. Among many massifs in the Balkan Peninsula, the Shara mountain distinguishes itself with its flora, fauna, eco-systems and genetic resources, as a centre with a distinguished high-mountain and local endemism and geological, geo-morphological, hydrological characteristics. It is the largest compact area covered with pastures on the European continent. The mountain extends along the border of the south-west parts of Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and the north-west parts of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, between the Prizren-Metohia valley and the Polog valley. The basic elements of its geographical position are: being a part of the Shara-Pind mountain system, i.e. of the Dinarids in a wider perspective, the fact that it is open to the climatic influences of the Adriatic Sea, across the valleys of the rivers Beli Drim and Prizrenska Bistrica and down to the Aegean Sea, along the valleys of the rivers Vardar and Lepenec, as well as its central position on the Balkan Peninsula. Due to the remarkable morphological unity that is characteristic for the high mountain range of Shara, it was mentioned under the name “Scardus” on the Ptolomeus’s map created back in the Antic period.

38. Taking into consideration the previously mentioned qualities of Shara mountain, it is clear that by establishing the Shara national park, an efficient protection of this area will be provided, and that this will be pre-requisite for preservation of the exceptional qualities that this natural region abounds with. The preservation of the rare and endangered flora and fauna on Shar Planina will be conveyed in collaboration with the institutions in charge of the nature protection in Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, because on its territory there is already national park Shara on the south-west side of Shara mountain, which was established in 1986 on a territory of 39.000 hectares.

39. The initiation of the procedure for proclaiming a part of the Shara mountain on The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonian side for as a fourth national park lies within the goal of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonian Government to increase the proportion of protected areas currently 7% to 12.5% of the national territory by 2015. In 2006, the Ministry of environment and Physical planning of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia sent a request to the UNEP for the assistance for the establishment of a National park in the Shara Mountain Area on The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonian side. Feasibility Study for the establishment of the National Park in The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonian side of “Shara” Mountain, supported by UNEP, was finished in September 2006. Shara is one of the identified priority hotspots in the framework of the ENVSEC project on enhancing transboundary biodiversity management in SEE.

40. The proposed area for the National Park “Shara” on The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonian side would cover a territory of 51.858 hectares, which is approximately 30% of the whole territory of the Shara mountain. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 share important natural resources, such as the outstanding trans-boundary mountain ecosystems of the Shara mountain complex, and establishing the Shara trans-boundary protected area it will be of great benefit (see map in the Annex). But the benefits of establishing Shara trans-boundary protected area can go well beyond biodiversity conservation, such area can also play a major role in promoting cooperation and confidence building between The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and within the SEE region.

Best practice example - the Balkan Peace Park Project

41. The Balkan Peace Park Project (BPPP) has been implemented in Prokletije / Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountain range at the confluence of borders of Albania, Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and Montenegro. In 1999 this important initiative was launched by a grassroots movement based on the enthusiasm of environmental activists in the SEE countries, the United Kingdom and other European countries, as well as the USA and Canada.

42. The Peace Park concept behind this initiative aims at establishing 'areas of wild, beautiful landscape between two or more countries where visitors, local people and wildlife can move on foot in complete freedom, unimpeded by frontiers, border posts and landmines'. Following the IUCN definition of 2001 Peace Parks are 'transboundary protected areas that are formally dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and to the promotion of peace and cooperation'.

43. Following the above concept the ultimate objective of this initiative is to facilitate establishment of a transboundary park in the mountain area shared by Albania, Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and Montenegro as a symbol of peace, stability and cooperation. Furthermore the project aims at environmental protection, stimulating local employment and promoting sustainable tourism development in the region. An important aim of the BPP project is to enable the local people to continue to live in the valleys of the mountain region seriously depopulated due to the economic crisis of 1997 followed by the destruction and deforestation during the war of 1998 - 2000.

44. In order to accomplish the above tasks the BPPP initiated consultations involving local inhabitants, the scientific and environmental communities, civil society, non-governmental organisations, administration and governments of the three neighbouring countries. The BPPP aims at raising the support of the relevant regional and local administrations, also by raising funds for different conservation- and development-oriented community projects. The BPPP links its nature conservation objectives with supporting local economies by investing in ecotourism infrastructure development in the way of refurbishing old traditional houses and mountain huts, by training local people as tourist guides, by producing maps and information materials for visitors, and by promoting traditional industries such as honey-making, raki-making and cheese-making or local products like baked goods, fresh fruits, forest berries, herbs and vegetables.

45. At the beginning this was a simple volunteer-based initiative, which later developed into a fully-fledged ecological movement with its own organisation registered as a charity in the UK, contributing members, regularly meeting General Assembly and steering committee, website and information materials, and its own information office. The BPP project Committee formed at an open meeting held in June 2001 in York (UK). A network of contacts was established in the region, especially in Albania (Theth, Shkodër, Tirana) and Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (Pec, Rugova), followed by partnerships with local NGOs in all three national parts of the region.

46. On the 1st October 2005 the 'Balkans Peace Park Information Centre' was opened in Shkodër, Albania. Similar offices are also planned in the future in Plav and Pejë/Pec, depending on available funding. The main task of the Centre is to support establishment of the Balkan Peace Park and foster cooperation between the three involved countries, as well as ecotourism development and providing information and services for visitors, training for local communities in the development of sustainable visitor activities, and encouragement for the restoration of cultural heritage and traditional features.

47. The range of project activities includes organisation of transboundary events promoting the BPP idea, such as walking treks across all three national parts ('Long Walk for Peace'), International Peace Park Conferences, cycle tours, experience exchange through workshops, meetings and study visits and promotional activities include media releases and newsletters, press, radio and TV appearances in SEE, a promotional video, papers presented at academic conferences or slide talks. An exhibition

48. The Balkans Peace Park Conference "Strategic Cooperation between Civil Society, Local Authorities and International Institutions" organised by the BPP Coalition in November 2006, managed to bring either mayors or the deputies of six Prokletije mountains region municipalities. The mayors signed a "Letter of good intent for cross border local authorities of Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244. With the letter, the local authorities of Municipalities/districts of Shkodra and Bajram Curri in Albania, Plav and Rozaje in Montenegro and Pec and Decani in Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, covering the proposed Peace park region, will commit to cross-border municipal cooperation and reciprocal participation in the development programmes of common interest.

49. Indeed, working relationships with the governments seem to be most crucial for the future of the project, keeping in mind initiatives to merge and extend protected areas to the size of 38 000 ha on the Albanian side, to designate the Prokletije Mts. in Montenegro as a new national park of the approximate size of 14 000 ha, and to designate a new Bjeshkët e Nemuna national park in Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 with an area of some 50 000 ha. The above initiatives may be complemented by the designation of the adjacent Mt. Mokra Gora as the protected landscape area in Serbia. The above plans may be hampered by budgetary problems in particular countries, e.g. the initiative of the Institute for Nature Protection cooperating with responsible authorities on the designation of Prokletije NP on the Montenegrin side has been stopped by the lack of finance.

50. Even though the BPPP gained the charitable status in the UK, the progress of the project to large extent depends on the financial support from donors, cooperation with other relevant international institutions (e.g. IUCN, UNDP, UNEP) and, last but not least, the political commitment for cooperation in the Prokletije / Bjeshkët e Nemuna region.

Other SEE Mountain Area initiatives

The European Green Belt

51. The European Green Belt is an initiative driven by the IUCN (World Conservation Union). It is the aim of the initiative to create the backbone of an ecological network that runs from the Barents to the Black Sea, spanning some of the most important habitats for biodiversity and almost all distinct biogeographical regions in Europe. It connects National Parks, Nature Parks, Biosphere Reserves and transboundary protected areas as well as non-protected areas along or across borders and it supports regional development initiatives based on nature conservation. The initiatives objectives range from the local to the global level.

52. Due to the political development on SEE in the past decade, new borders were formed and old borders got new significance and meaning. In the aftermath of the former Yugoslavian countries' struggles for independency, the Balkan Green Belt was one of the few concepts for networking, when transboundary cooperation activities on the governmental level were rare, and in some cases cooperation is happening without official commitments. The border between southern Hungary and Serbia and Romania is also the current border of the European Union. These borders call for a strong cooperation in nature conservation and regional development in order to tackle land abandonment and loss of cultural landscapes.

53. The Balkan Green Belt is an extremely heterogeneous, but mostly natural corridor. The lowest altitudes of the Pannonian Plain are at the Danube with only 68 to 88m above sea level, while the mountain peaks reach 2753m in the Korab Mountain between Albania and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. From the Adriatic Sea at the mouth of the Bojana River, the landscape rises in a distance of only 80km up to 2693m in the Prokletije massive between Albania, Montenegro and in Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244. The Green Belt links important wetlands such as coastal areas, rivers and lakes with the mountains in the very centre of the SEE region.

54. Especially the rivers, lifelines in nature, form large stretches of the Green Belt. The Danube, being of course the dominant river of the region, flows along the borders and through several countries. Just as important for nature conservation are the smaller rivers, such as the Bojana, a frontier river between Albania and Montenegro, that is only 30km long, but in many portions it is still a naturally flowing river. Lake Prespa is an important resting spot for migratory birds and, just as Lake Ohrid, it is the breeding area for many threatened species. Lake Skutari, host of the Dalmatian Pelikan, is one of the most fascinating landscapes in the border region of Albania and Montenegro.

55. Areas in most of the South East European countries face threats that are mainly caused by structural and management deficits, such as an unsustainable use of natural resources, an

ineffective protected area management and lack of awareness as well as financial resources. While management plans mainly focus on the economic benefits, plans are usually not made in cooperation with local communities and NGOs. Most of the global guidelines for resource management planning are not integrated yet into the planning process. Regulations on nature conservation are often insufficiently positioned within the legal framework, and although most of the sectoral laws do exist, capacities of the authorities in most of the South East European countries are often insufficient for the development of strategies and the implementation of sustainable Management Plans. Until now the coverage of protected areas is low in South Eastern Europe and ecological corridors are just about non-existent.

56. The urge for economic development confronts us with infrastructure and development projects that would lead to a degradation of those landscapes that are the basis for tourism. A transboundary approach to marketing the region for sustainable tourism will probably address a wider range of target groups. Even before the political change in Europe, Euronatur recognised the ecological value of the border zone between East and West. In 1990, the NGO started to initiate and implement conservation activities also the southern section of the Green Belt. The first concrete initiative was started off in the transboundary zone of the Danube-Drava-Mura river corridor.

57. In 2004 the IUCN opened its Programme Office for South Eastern Europe in Belgrade. In close cooperation with the Nature Conservation Institute the First Regional Meeting for the South Eastern European Green Belt took place in Novi Sad in November 2005. 44 participants from the South European Green Belt countries came together to exchange information and experience in their work in nature conservation and regional development. This gave the opportunity to discuss the initiatives goals and targets for the region and to articulate expectations for further cooperation. The IUCN Strategy for South Eastern Europe identifies a preliminary list of 38 important transboundary sites where protected areas should be developed. 20 of these are in the line of the Green Belt. Thus the Green Belt initiative offers an ideal opportunity to promote protected areas as a tool for regional development in the southeast of Europe, and to form an outstanding chain of protected areas.

The Dinaric Arc Initiative

58. The Dinaric Arc is a region of South-Eastern Europe with a surface of approximately 100,000 km² and more than 6,000 km of coastline, encompassing the whole region facing the eastern Adriatic Sea, from the area of Trieste (Italy) to Tirana (Albania). It includes portions of the following countries: Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Albania.

WWF, UNESCO-BRESCE, UNDP, UNEP, IUCN, the Council of Europe, FAO, Euronatur and SNV are concerned with the future of the Dinaric Arc, and are active in the region with a varied portfolio of projects and initiatives aimed at securing the long-term conservation and sustainable development of this part of Europe. These institutions have joined forces and created The Dinaric Arc Initiative (DAI).

59. DAI is a broad framework of collaboration which aims to add value to the on-going programmes and activities of all its partners, and put in place new specific actions aiming at the preservation of the wealth and integrity of the Dinaric Arc through the establishment of

networks of protected areas and ecological corridors, and support to initiatives for the conservation of its biological diversity and the sustainable management of its resources; the promotion of intercultural dialogue, transboundary collaboration and scientific co-operation among the countries of the region and the empowerment of local societies to foster local community development through rural development measures based on the valorisation of the natural and cultural heritage, without over-exploiting the capital of the natural resources.

60. The partners of the DAI expect to reach these ambitious objectives by encouraging the development of diversified initiatives and putting in place specific field projects, supporting policy and advocacy processes, helping build the capacity of key stakeholders in the region, and promoting awareness and education campaigns for target audiences in the countries of the Dinaric Arc.

South East European network of Important Plant Areas

61. The South East European network of Important Plant Areas (IPA) has been established as a focal point for contributions to the European Plant conservation strategy. Covering Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia (including Kosovo as defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244), the network contributes to the protection and sustainable use of plant species within sites primarily in mountainous border areas. Important plant species are surveyed and pilot areas for transboundary conservation are identified.

SUSTAINABLE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND TERRITORIAL PLANNING

62. Mountains are an important source of water, energy and biological diversity. Furthermore, they are a source of such key resources as minerals, forest products, and of recreation. As a major ecosystem representing the complex of interrelated ecology of our planet, mountain environments are essential to the survival of the global ecosystem. Further in the Agenda 21, Chapter 13 (Managing fragile ecosystems – sustainable mountain development) states that mountain areas are highly vulnerable due to their special characteristics (fragile ecosystems, hard climatic conditions, isolation, political and economic marginality, etc.). Therefore, conservation of the natural heritage, sustainable local development and territorial planning have to go hand in hand. There is clearly a need for integrated and participatory approaches based on typical resources of the local area. Synergies between various sectors (agriculture, handicraft, tourism, nature, etc.) have to be developed and strengthened.

63. Consequently, a bottom-up approach has to be applied. Also important for the successful implementation of sustainable mountain development, is the creation and/or improvement of policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms in most of the countries in the region. Those have to be specifically tailored towards the needs of local people in mountainous areas and should be supportive to local initiatives. As examples, the Austrian “Multi-sectoral mountain policy”, the Polish “Act concerning the economic development of mountain areas” and the Croatian Hill and Mountain Areas Act could be used. In case of absence of such policy instruments, specific measures concerning mountains should be added to existing sectoral policies.

64. The fact that thousands of such local initiatives exist already means that the potential for sharing experiences and networking is limitless. As experience has shown, the practical

example is the best means of illustration for all actors. As mentioned already, there are several similarities between the three mountain ranges of the Alps, the Carpathians and South Eastern Europe. Thus, networking and learning from each other seems a most appropriate approach. The first step towards this goal was the conference in Bolzano, Italy, in December 2005. A more detailed look should be taken to examine and share experience from local initiatives that help to implement the Alpine and Carpathian Conventions. Examples include independent marketing of organically produced products, nature tourism, fruitful partnerships between municipalities – the so called “Alliance of the Alps” –, and many others.

65. The challenge facing the South East Europe region is a daunting one: how to increase material livelihoods of the population - in terms of development and quality of life - whilst at the same time conserving and sustainably managing the rich biodiversity and cultural heritage of the region.

Possible solution to this could be using the basic premise that socio-economic development and nature conservation do not need to be opposing forces. Rather, each should be the underpinning foundation of the other.

To ensure that long-term sustainable development of the South East Europe first and foremost benefits local people and communities, and stops the ongoing trends of increasing poverty, unemployment, rural depopulation and loss of traditional practices.

CONCLUSIONS

66. Despite having so many instruments in place, we are still losing biodiversity worldwide. Often the driving forces are too complex and underlying socio-economic factors and their root causes are not understood. The future for the South East European region is very challenging, as the environment of this region in transition is still facing many difficulties and threats. Specifically in the light of EU accession, the increasing integration with Western Europe and the liberalization of markets, governments have to take the responsibility to steer the development towards a sustainable future. The conditions in the various parts of the South East European Mountains vary widely, and in terms of economic and social aspects the South East European states represent small markets. Their economic sustainability depends on the creation of a common economic area that will attract foreign investors. In this sense, the regional approach is necessary precondition for sustainable development. Solutions to the problems of the region should emanate from the countries of the region.

67. It is or should be clear that institutionalised multilateral regional cooperation functions in a complementary and supportive way to the European integration process of the SEE countries. Coordination of action and common goals boost their European course, strengthen their voice and reinforce EU efforts to form an effective regional policy. The EU has set regional cooperation as a necessary condition and target.

68. As with possible development of South East European legal framework, it would be wrong to generalize and to simplistically transfer the Alpine and Carpathian experiences for cooperation and sustainable development to South Eastern Europe. The different conditions in each of the countries should be taken into account and solutions should be tailored to specific local needs and circumstances, while cross-referencing with international experience

is necessary and valuable. It is also clear that mountain areas need an integral approach towards sustainable development.

69. The South East Europe region is covered by numerous Multi Environmental Agreements (MEA) but lack of implementation is often being reported. Most existing instruments are seen in isolation, if implemented only on a national or local level, not looking at integration between policies and/or sectors. Generally, there is poor coordination, only limited cooperation and severe financial constraints. A legal framework on the protection and sustainable development of the transboundary mountain ecosystems of the South East Europe could provide some added values. The sectors most relevant in this context are conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, sustainable local development based on rich natural and cultural heritage and tourism. Specifically in those sectors, a legal framework would bring additional benefits. Furthermore, the cooperation and sustainable development of South East Europe based on legal framework could:

- enhance implementation of existing instruments and harmonising the processes in the region;
- stimulate future partnerships and attract donors;
- establish sub-regional platform for transfer of mountain technologies;
- foster integration and coordination between sectors;
- enhance the transboundary cooperation for the protection of mountain regions and the development of innovative regional and local sustainable development concepts.

70. Summarizing the paper, the proposed cooperation on the protection and sustainable development of mountain regions/areas in South-Eastern Europe in a form of legal framework could foster cooperation, help in harmonization, strengthen integration and it would place the South East Europe within a holistic development perspective. The process to negotiate a new legal framework, to establish a Secretariat and the implementation will require financial resources. These additional costs and accompanying bureaucracy have to be weighed against the potential benefits. A legal framework by itself can never be a miracle cure. This clearly will require strong political will for implementation, as well as a range of programmatic activities supporting the framework's provision, civil society, people and the environment must be put at the forefront of the framework if its intended to work for the environment and for the people of the region.