



## Case study // Round Table SDG 15: Biodiversity at the Heart of Sustainable Development - Toward Transformation and Resilience

### **Expanding Protected Areas in the Balkans The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**

*Level: subnational*

#### **Summary**

FYR of Macedonia is carrying out a valorisation study of the natural values of Shar Mountain, one of the main biodiversity hotspots on the Balkan Peninsula. The study will provide analysis of all available environmental, territorial and socio-economic information, including recommendation for category of protection, proposed zoning and management options. It is one of the key documents to initiate the process of proclamation of an area and achieve protection category - national park. With its proclamation, Shar Mountain will finally receive its long awaited and real position on the map of protected areas worldwide, thus contributing both to natural protection and socio-economic development of the entire region.

#### **Situation**

Covering only 5% of the Balkan Peninsula, FYR of Macedonia displays a wealth of biodiversity and accompanying ecosystem services which can be considered a significant concentration of natural capital for the nation's sustainable development path. The FYR of Macedonia, although a small country, due to its climatic and topographic and geographic variety, has a disproportional number of habitats and species of regional and European importance. With estimates of 35% - 43% of the nation under forest, the country contains more than 16 000 wild species in several groups: bacteria, lichens, fungi, mosses, higher plants, invertebrate and vertebrate animals, 853 of which are endemic.

Shar Mountain has been recognized as one of the main biodiversity hotspots in the Balkan Peninsula, and it has been designated internationally and nationally as priority for protection. The need for its protection has been recognized nationally with many planning documents, including the National Spatial Plan, First National Biodiversity Strategy with an Action Plan, Second National Biodiversity Strategy and Nature Protection Strategy (at the moment, both pending for adoption), National Water Strategy, etc.

Geographically spreading over the territory of three countries, FYR Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo (Under UNSCR 1244/99), Shar Mountain is positioned as a biodiversity "hot spot" not only on the Balkans, but would be one of the largest protected areas in Europe. In 2006, through the Dinaric Arc Initiative with the support of ADA and CDA, UN Environment lead a project on the protection of natural values in the Balkan region and improved management of transboundary areas. A methodology for identification of transboundary areas (protected or worth for protection) was developed, based on which, in cooperation with local experts, feasibility studies for three priority areas have been prepared,

including Shar Mountain-Deshat-Korab. In addition, Shar Mountain has also been proposed as one of the areas that require further research to be possibly included in the future Natura 2000 network.

Following the importance of Shar Mountain on local, regional and international level, as well as the priority of the country to increase the network of protected areas, with support of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), UN Environment Vienna Programme Office in cooperation with the Macedonian Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning have received and are currently implementing a full-size project “Achieving Biodiversity Conservation Through Creation and Effective Management of Protected Areas and Mainstreaming Biodiversity into Land Use Planning”.

### Strategy

The main project objective is to support the expansion of national protected areas system and enhancing capacity conditions for effective management and mainstreaming of biodiversity into production landscape.

Within the scope of the first project component “Increase of Protected Area(s) Network”, a consortium of partners has been engaged, Tetovo State University-Institute of Ecology and Technology (located on Shar Mountain) and University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” Skopje, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, to implement and develop a full study for valorisation of the natural values of Shar Mountain. The purpose of this study is to present in a consolidated manner all relevant information for designation of Shar Mountain, including detailed analysis of all available environmental, territorial and socio-economic information pertaining to the envisaged protected area, and develop a strategy for protection including precise zoning and management options.

### Results and impact

The specific aims of this study are:

- a) To provide scientific data of the current state of the environment for the envisaged protected area,
- b) To provide analysis of current state of socio-economic trends and provide viable options for the local communities,
- c) To develop a strategy for protection, including territorial zoning and proposed recommendations for the category of protection,
- d) To contain all necessary information required under the national legislation.

The study will be subject of discussion with relevant stakeholders, and local communities through workshops and public hearings, at which the target area of protection will be identified, based on the developed criteria for prioritization of proclamation of PAs. All meetings and developed documents will take into consideration gender equality, as well as appropriate involvement of vulnerable groups and all ethnic groups represented in the country.

The developed methodology and the experiences gained with it will be well documented, so that it can serve as reference for broader and more systematic future reporting and studies required. Most importantly, the valorisation study is one of the key documents required for initiation of the official process of proclamation of Shar Mountain under protection category - national park.



With this, Shar Mountain will finally receive its long awaited and real position on the map of protected areas worldwide, thus contributing both to natural protection and socio-economic development of the entire region.

### **Challenges and lessons learned**

Natural values on Shara are under great anthropogenic pressure causing numerous threats that lead to degradation of such values, including:

- Habitats conversion
- Loss or degradation of habitats or even entire ecosystems
- Habitats fragmentation
- Disturbance of ecological processes in the ecosystems
- Change or disturbance of mutual relations in the bio-cenosis
- Loss of species or reduction of population,
- Landslides, rock-falls, degradation of landscapes and geo-values, etc.

Following Shar Mountain importance on national and international level and in order to avoid or reduce to minimum any future degradation of its natural values, through the project, the country is taking real actions for its immediate protection under the category-national park and proper future management of Shar Mountain.

### **Potential for replication**

The developed methodology and the experiences gained through the preparation of the valorisation study, can serve as a reference for broader and more systematic future reporting and studies required. It will also serve as a possibility to identify possible activities in the region that on one hand will support the life of local communities in terms of socio-economic development, and on the other, will be in line with the national priorities and principles for nature protection and conservation.

### **Contact**

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