

# ISSUE SHEET 6



Photo: Aleksandar Alekovski

## A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ECO-TOURISM

The Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) in the Bregalnica region of North Macedonia seeks to combine biodiversity conservation with socio-economic development. One series of interventions to this effect was the introduction and promotion of eco-tourism in and around the newly established Protected Areas (PAs) of Osogovo and Maleshevo. This Issue Sheet outlines the way in which eco-tourism was tailored to the local context and the achievements made. The relatively long period of programme support over more than a decade allowed a “learning by doing” approach that favours sustainability.

*“The NCP in partnership with Centre for Development of the Eastern Planning Region (CDEPR) supported the local communities in the Eastern region in sustainable development and preserving areas for wildlife, while simultaneously creating opportunities for economic growth and initiatives that benefit the community. Through this experience CDEPR has become regional leader in promoting local traditions, raising environmental consciousness, and adding value to the region through promoting it as an attractive tourist destination.*

*We have incorporated the values of the NCP in our mission and continue to implement projects that encourage experience based, nature-friendly tourism.”* Andrea Zlatkovska, Eco-tourism coordinator / Coordinator for strategic planning and regional development, CDEPR, March 2023.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Eco-tourism has supported the continuation of local traditions, cultural heritage, and ways of life that were dying out
- Although the Covid-19 pandemic impacted global tourism very negatively, an analysis of post-Covid tourist demands revealed ways to make eco-tourism in the region particularly attractive and stimulated domestic tourism
- Locally rooted tourist service providers tend to re-invest locally, thus distributing the added value to other local economic sectors and ensuring that it is kept within the local economic cycle as far as possible
- Strong collaboration between tourism experts, environmentalists and decision-makers within the Bregalnica region has contributed to the joint development of strategies for the future. This now needs to be integrated into a national vision for tourism development
- Eco-tourism alone cannot halt rural migration in areas where this is widespread; however, it can help to mitigate the trend
- There are limits to eco-tourism in the absence of good access by public transport; a lack of rail links is especially unfortunate when aiming to attract environmentally conscious travellers
- Rural municipalities seeking to promote eco-tourism need budgetary provision to do so, including for maintenance.

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

A **desk-top study and field research** found that tourism in the Bregalnica region was under-developed. The study maps the areas with touristic potential as well as the localities that are of particular cultural, scientific, or tourist interest. A **strategy for the development of eco-tourism** in the Eastern planning region was also elaborated with project support, complete with an action plan (2016-2025). These documents set a framework for eco-friendly touristic development within the region. According to the defined priorities, the NCP provided funds for the development of the most promising areas, providing improved access and tourism related infrastructure.



## STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

NCP adopted a bottom-up, inclusive, and participatory approach in all its activities; eco-tourism was no exception. Representatives of all the regional stakeholders, including staff from the concerned municipalities, Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning (MOEPP), Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE), the local population, NGOs, and citizen associations as well as other regional and national authorities were actively involved in all project activities from planning to implementation and monitoring. The project provided tailor-made training sessions in eco-tourism to regional and local stakeholders who also, with representatives of national institutions, had the opportunity to attend multiple conferences and study tours both in-country and abroad. All these trained individuals participated in working groups that provided inputs to the strategic documents mentioned above.

## SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-LED INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

It was widely agreed by the stakeholders that establishing appropriate infrastructure was a necessary first step in making the region more attractive and accessible to a variety of tourist groups, both national and international. Municipalities in the region put forward a range of proposals inviting co-investment by the NCP. In doing so, they not only aimed to attract tourists and stimulate the local economy but also to enhance the municipal living space, especially for young families (the population segment most likely to migrate). One significant early investment was the establishment of an information centre at Ponikva (Osogovo) in parallel with a tourist office within the CDEPR. Another important initiative was the creation of an **educational centre for nature conservation** in Negrevo (Maleshevo) in a disused school building. Other interventions co-funded through the programme included the marking, protection and explanation of a paleontological site Stamer-the creation of eco-ethno parks in the villages of Chesinovo and Sokolarci (part of the European Stork Villages Network). In total, 300km of hiking and biking trails around Osogovo and Maleshevo were also established. As municipal budgets were (and are) limited, the NCP was the major investor in all these infrastructure developments; however, they all fall under the jurisdiction of the respective municipalities, which are committed to their maintenance. This assures continuity after the programme completion. The information centre at Ponikva is now also the administrative headquarters of the newly established PA Osogovo. Educational center for nature conservation in Negrevo has an additional content as info point for PA Maleshevo, and is one of central points for tourism in Malesh Pijanec micro region.





## ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PROTECTED AREAS (PAs) OSOGOVO AND MALESHEVO

The key achievement of the NCP, and an essential base for the sustainable development of the Eastern Region, was the proclamation of parts of the Osogovo mountains in 2020 and Maleshevo in 2021 as Protected Areas (category V under national law, which is fully aligned with IUCN classification). Both areas are now classified as protected landscapes, with a total coverage of 60,267 ha. For more information see Issue Sheet 3.

The designation procedure was completed through the joint efforts of all programme partners and stakeholders: an ultimately successful outcome of a long and challenging process. The public enterprise “National forests” (PENF) has administrative and operational responsibility for the newly established PAs, but in each case, a management body allows for representatives of all stakeholder groups to participate in strategic decision-making.

Efforts to introduce eco-tourism have been facilitated through the official PA status. The region has growing international recognition for its well-preserved natural environment, potential for different outdoor activities, and distinct culture and traditions.



## CO-INVESTING WITH INNOVATIVE AND RESPONSIBLE LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

NCP also investigated existing tourist offers in the region, calling for proposals from innovative local service providers that offered a unique experience to visitors. Eight were selected for co-investment. Promotional activities were delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but this allowed a period of reflection on targeting the offer. It was recognized that the pandemic-induced lockdown and health concerns had fuelled a demand amongst domestic and European tourists for authentic “rural life” experiences. The Bregalnica region provides the chance to spend time in natural environments, away from crowds of other holiday-makers. Each of the eight local service providers analysed how to respond to this demand and grow their business. The co-investment that was eventually agreed ranged from the procurement of equipment such as mountain bikes, bee-keeping tools and furniture to small infrastructure developments such as expanding a soap-making workshop.



NCP then worked with two domestic tourist operators to develop two different packages targeting national and European demand for “rural life” tourism. The packages each featured a combination of different activities offered by some of the eight local service providers. The operator “Mountain experience” put together a package focused on Maleshevo, featuring apitherapy as well as honey-tasting and sale; a visit to a sheep farm where it is possible to milk sheep, taste sheep cheese and other dairy products; mountain bike tours; and a visit to an **educational centre for nature conservation**. Here appropriately equipped camping facilities allow visitors the chance to sleep out under the stars in an area of low light pollution.



Photo: Goran Alachki. Workshop on traditional music and dances

Meanwhile, Balkan Prime Tours offered a package covering the whole Bregalnica region. It included the option to attend a residential workshop on traditional music (including accordion lessons and traditional dances, known as “oro”); make artisanal soap scented with local flowers or herbs; ride on horseback, or take a course in hippotherapy at an animal rescue centre. Additionally, mountain e-bikes can be hired to explore the countryside with the help of local guides who received support from NCP to become certified. Both hiking and biking tours are offered, using the trails that were marked during the time of programme support for infrastructure establishment.

The integrated tourist offers have been promoted in the country and at international tourism fairs throughout Europe and are available for booking through domestic tour operators.



*“Being supported in continuing the family tradition of soap-making, given the possibility to offer my products to tourists visiting the area, and transferring the knowledge for artisan soap-making during the workshops is a great way to generate additional income from doing something that I love. Considering that all of my herbs come from what is now known as an official Protected Area, it further adds value to my products and contributes to the branding of the region.” Daniela Krstevska, Owner of MySoap, local service provider supported by NCP, December 2022*



Photo: Aleksandar Ivanovski



## BENEFITS FOR BIODIVERSITY

All the enterprises selected for support by NCP depend on the Osogovo Mountains and/or Maleshevo Protected Areas remaining attractive, well managed rural environments. All of them provided evidence of their environmental credentials when making their co-investment proposals to the NCP; all are committed to actions such as waste minimalization and recycling. It is understood that the service providers, the businesses associated with them, as well as the municipal authorities, will continue this commitment in future. There is also a general recognition of the benefit of attracting greater numbers of Macedonian tourists, thus swelling public opinion in favor of biodiversity conservation. National visitors also come with a lower carbon footprint.



## CHALLENGES

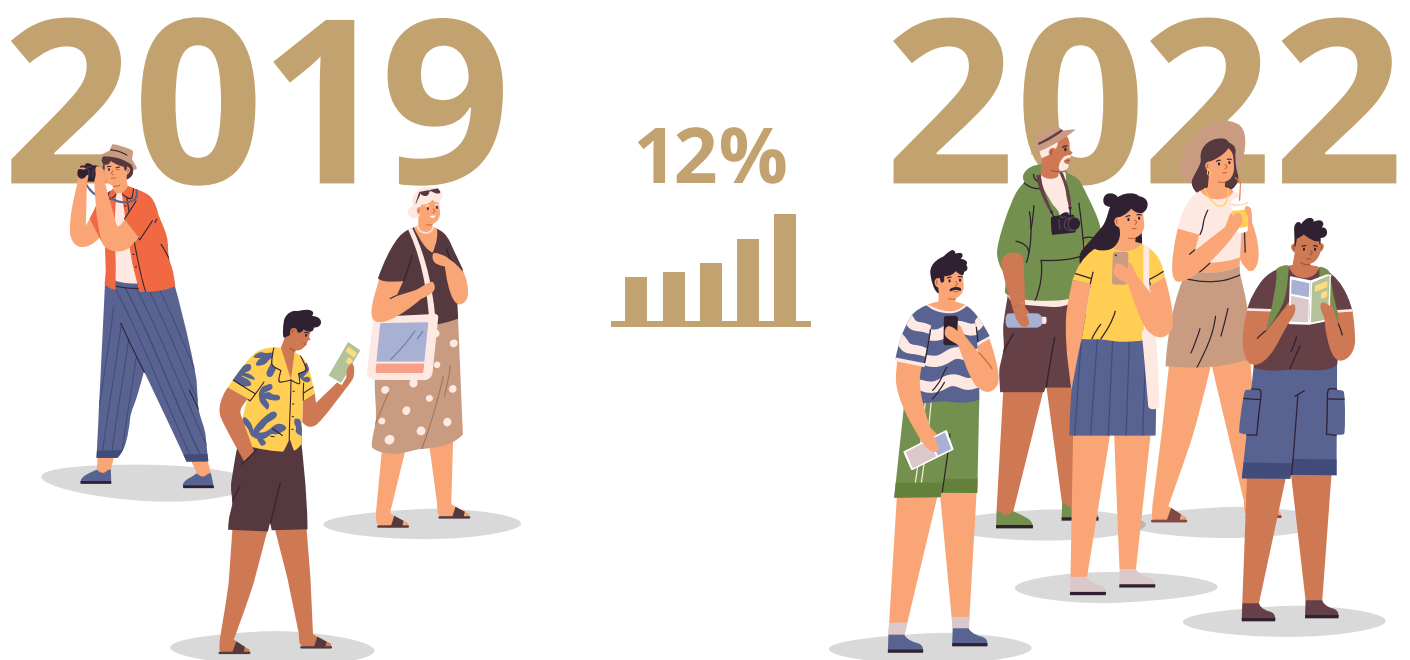
Not everyone in the Bregalnica region was happy about creating Protected Areas when the proposal was first introduced. Some stakeholders feared that conservation measures would be restrictive and reduce opportunities for economic development, including tourism. However, only a very small part of the PAs is designated as strictly protected (3,76% of total area in Osogovo and 4.54% of the total area in Maleshevo). For such places, an access permit is required; this is usually only granted for scientific research. All other parts of the PAs are non-restricted and can be used for sustainable touristic activities. It was important to consult with local residents on such matters, and to include municipalities in all strategic discussions. In time, potential concerns were resolved and broad support for the PAs was established.

For environmentally conscious foreign tourists, the lack of rail connectivity is a drawback, as is the absence of any direct connection across the Bulgarian or Serbian borders. The construction of a railway connecting Kriva Palanka – Beljakovce – to the Bulgarian border is planned, but it is not yet certain when this will be implemented. This noted, recent improvements in the road connectivity between Skopje and the Bregalnica region have rendered it more attractive to domestic tourists seeking short rural breaks.

There are also strategic aspects that it is difficult for the project to influence. One is integrating the strategic plan for eco-tourism development in East Planning Region into a national strategic plan for tourism development – which is not yet elaborated. However, the regional plan for East Planning Region has shown a way forward from which other regions (including those with a more developed touristic offer) can potentially learn. A second challenge is the relatively small budgets with which municipalities operate – especially the smaller ones; this is exacerbated by the unfinished decentralization process in North Macedonia. Fortunately, various external funding schemes are available for rural development in the Balkans (especially through the European Union). The NCP has therefore supported municipal representatives in exposure visits to other eco-tourism activities and in training on proposal writing. In this way, it has aimed to stimulate ideas for new interventions, and the skills to generate further funding within municipalities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Given that eco-tourism in the region (and throughout the country) is still only just beginning, the activities supported through the NCP may be considered very successful, with high potential for replication in other regions. Overnight tourist visits to the Bregalnica region increased in 2022 by 12% compared to pre-Covid-19 levels in 2019; the trend observed in bookings is upward. The development of new, similar projects, as well as the scaling up of NCP-supported initiatives, indicates growing interest in eco-tourism and the likely continuation of such initiatives. A number of people are also now renovating their abandoned houses in order to adapt them for tourist accommodation. All these are positive signs for rural regeneration and of local peoples' support for nature conservation.





## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Include representatives of all stakeholder groups from the beginning of planning interventions to ensure that they are well informed; address any concerns quickly, to avoid negative perceptions becoming entrenched.
- Carefully assess tourist demand, and tailor the offer to attract one or more specific touristic segments.
- Understand what the region can offer, especially unique or special aspects around which a “destination story” can be created for positioning (the Unique Selling Proposition, USP).
- Monitor political agenda that influence rural development; where possible, contribute to policy debates to promote sustainable tourism whilst avoiding taking a party political stance.

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The Nature Conservation Programme, NCP is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC. Implemented in phase 1 by Helvetas in collaboration with Farmahem and then in phases 2 and 3 by Farmahem with back-stopping support from Helvetas, the total project lifespan is 12 years (2015 – 2023).

