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SUMMARY OF THE DRAFT REPORT

**Enhancing Trans-boundary Biodiversity Management
in South Eastern Europe**

Prepared under the Environment and Security Initiative (OSCE, UNEP, UNDP and NATO)

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Executive Summary

The project “Enhancing Trans-boundary Biodiversity Management in South Eastern Europe” addresses the problems related to transboundary and interregional cooperation in mountainous protected area management. The countries and territories described in the report are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo¹, directly or indirectly involved in the ethnic conflicts that escalated in the past years in the Balkan region. The description of the current situation in the above described project area has been additionally supplemented by the information on Bulgaria as a 'point of reference'.

The region in focus harbours an exceptional wealth of biodiversity of flora and fauna, with a great number of either Balkan, Dinaric or local endemic species, well preserved especially in the remote mountain areas. Many plant and animal species are of either global or European conservation importance, e.g. those listed in Annexes to the EC Habitat Directive.

Simultaneously, a large number of species already became extinct in the region while the occurrence of some other species is seriously endangered and threatened, mostly due to still increasing anthropogenic pressure. The loss of biodiversity is ongoing in all countries within the scope of this project. It is important to stress that the unique biodiversity of the Balkans is not only a treasure shared by the countries of the region but its protection is also a common responsibility. The report analyses threats to environment and biodiversity of countries in focus.

It is important to note that the geographical range of influence of most major environmental threats extends well beyond the state borders of respective countries and territories. Some of these threats can not be mitigated and controlled by respective countries alone, and the need for joint actions to be undertaken at a regional scale is obvious. Simultaneously all countries of the region face similar impediments for improving the current state of environment, nature and biodiversity within the reasonable timeframe.

One of the possible solutions would be to initiate the process of regional consultations between all countries of the region in order to identify and agree upon common priorities for action. This could further lead towards signing bilateral, multilateral and regional agreements on cooperation in environment and nature protection, fostering conservation of the biodiversity at the eco-regional scale. However, it has to be noted that reaching such necessary region-wide agreement would require high-level political commitment and several years of consultations while the biodiversity loss continues. Therefore, protecting the overall biodiversity of all the involved countries and territories will only be possible if priority actions are taken immediately.

It is also important to remember that the decision on safekeeping national treasures like nature and biodiversity has to be taken in the proper time, due to irreversible course of matters illustrated by a simple example: a forest currently included into a protected area and excluded from the commercial use at present can always be harvested for commercial purposes or even cut down and turned into a residential area in the future, while the recovery of the former biodiversity of this area becomes impossible once the forest is no longer in place, the habitat is lost, its vegetation is destroyed, the wildlife is either gone or killed and the area is turned into an urban residential district.

The majority of protected areas existing today in the region are relatively small areas that may be suitable for protection of e.g. landscape phenomena or threatened plant species, but rather not for protection of representative larger fragments of valuable mountain ecosystems and habitats, and definitely not for protecting populations of large mammals, especially carnivorous ones.

¹ According to UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99 under UN interim administration

Therefore, all current initiatives aiming at the extension of already existing protected areas and establishing new large-scale protected areas are indispensable for protecting the best preserved natural areas of the Balkans - the 'crown jewels' of the Dinaric Mountains for the next generations.

The region still has the high potential for protecting even more natural areas of high biodiversity values than those designated until today. The share of areas under legal protection in the whole project area is currently close to 4.35 per cent, this index varies among countries from 0.6 per cent of the country area for Bosnia and Herzegovina to 7.14 per cent for Montenegro. However, due to e.g. current budgetary constraints, designation of large new protected areas by one country alone does not seem to be feasible, while concerted efforts of e.g. two or more partners may result in such a spectacular success for biodiversity protection.

This is why establishing large-scale transboundary protected areas seems to be the only solution currently acceptable from the state budget funding point of view. The report describes several initiatives aimed at establishing such areas in cooperation between the countries of the region, like e.g. the case of the 'Balkans Peace Parks Project' in the Prokletije / Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountain region of Albania, Kosovo (UNMIK) and Montenegro.

In general, biodiversity and protected area issues are present within the national legislation of all countries included in the project, and a similar legal framework is currently either being already enforced or still developed. However, in many countries biodiversity related issues are often fragmented among different legal acts. Furthermore, the legislation is often criticised for still existing gaps and overlapping competencies of various central level governmental agencies in particular concerning protected area management issues.

With the exception of Kosovo (UNMIK) all countries of the project area are Parties to numerous international conventions related to biodiversity, especially the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Future common actions aimed at protecting the overall biological diversity of the project area perceived as one coherent eco-region may require developing a special regional agreement, e.g. 'the Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Balkans'.

Nevertheless, one of the most important next steps should be identifying common strategic priorities and challenges that should be faced together by all countries of the project area, actions which can not be accomplished by one country alone, where regional or transboundary cooperation would be indispensable for the protection of nature and biological diversity of the whole Balkan eco-region.

The full version of the report is illustrated by several case studies describing the experience of several international cooperation initiatives from the Alps and the Carpathians, such as the Alpine Network of Protected Areas and the proposed Carpathian Network of Protected Areas. Another case study describes the first trilateral 'East Carpathians' Biosphere Reserve, a place where cooperation on nature conservation helped to build friendly relationships between nations that lost tens of thousands people in the armed ethnic conflict in the past. Transboundary cooperation on nature and cultural heritage of this area is supported by a special non-profit regional environmental trust fund established on the basis of a trilateral agreement between Poland, the Slovak Republic and Ukraine. The experience of the Carpathian Ecoregion Initiative which paved the way towards adopting the Carpathian Framework Convention is described in another case study as a potential source of inspiration for the partners cooperating in the Balkan region.

The full version of the report includes recommendations concerning activities to be undertaken both in particular countries of the region and at the 'eco-regional' scale, like the proposed protected area network for the Balkans. Furthermore, it contains brief guidelines for developing transboundary cooperation on biodiversity issues in the Balkan region.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the project

Mountain environments are essential to the survival of the global ecosystem. About 10 per cent of the world's population depends on mountain resources, while a much larger percentage draws on other mountain resources, especially water. As stressed in Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, which relates to sustainable mountain development, and also during the World Summit on Sustainable Development "*Mountain ecosystems support particular livelihoods, and include significant watershed resources, biological diversity and unique flora and fauna.*"² Mountain ecosystems are, however, rapidly changing due to their particular sensitivity to human activities, resulting e.g. in the rapid loss of habitat and genetic diversity. Hence, the proper management of mountain resources and socio-economic development of the people deserves quick and effective actions.

The programme of work on mountain biological diversity under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) provides clear recommendation for action at the (sub-) regional scale, by aiming to establish "*regional and transboundary collaboration and the establishment of cooperative agreements*"³ and calls CBD Parties to "*promote integrated transboundary cooperation, supported by legislation for sustainable activities on mountain ranges*"⁴. The same CBD programme recommends establishing and strengthening "*adequate, effective national and regional networks of mountain-protected areas*"⁵.

The programme of work on protected areas under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recommends to "*strengthen existing and establish new TBPA's (transboundary protected areas) to enhance conservation of biological diversity, implement the ecosystem approach, and improve international cooperation*"⁶, and in particular to "*enter into dialogue to establish, where appropriate, new TBPA's with adjacent Parties and countries, bearing in mind the ecosystem approach and the importance of ecological networks*"⁷.

Europe, and in particular its Balkan region is characterised by many borders that cut across ecosystems and areas of high natural values, usually dividing our continent along natural barriers like mountain ranges. Historically barriers to human migrations and communication between nations on both sides, mountain regions currently provide opportunities for international cooperation in protection of shared natural areas.

The countries and territories within the ambit of the project are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo⁸ which have been directly or indirectly involved in the ethnic conflicts that escalated in the past ten and more years in the Balkan region. These war-torn nations, where ethnic tensions still exist, have been also subject to economic crises as a result of their isolation from the global economy and the impacts of the transition from socialist economic policies to free market economies.

Uncontrolled and unsustainable industrial and economic activities in the fields of agriculture, construction, forest management and hunting, or illegal logging and collection of medicinal plants have been causing negative environmental impacts in the region. In consultations with stakeholders from the region, biodiversity loss was recognised as posing a security risk to the region (e.g. due to deforestation, poaching or transboundary pollution), whereas good technical cooperation in this field would contribute to stability and prosperity of the region.

2 Paragraph 42, the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit.

3 Goal 2.3., CBD programme of work on mountain biological diversity.

4 Action 2.3.1., CBD programme of work on mountain biological diversity.

5 Action 1.2.5., CBD programme of work on mountain biological diversity.

6 Goal 1.4. (Transboundary protected areas), CBD programme on protected areas.

7 Action 1.4.1., CBD programme on protected areas.

8 According to UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99 under UN interim administration

In some of the countries there is no legislation or only fragmented legislation exists for protected areas. Problems are aggravated by the fact that several separate institutions are responsible for protected area management in each of the countries and therefore management is disjointed. Most countries are lacking integrated management plans and, especially in the transboundary protected areas, due to the past conflicts in the region, there is sometimes a complete lack of co-operation making it impossible to address biodiversity threats in a co-ordinated manner.

The description of the current situation in the above described project area has been additionally supplemented by the information on Bulgaria as a 'point of reference'. Among all countries neighbouring the project area Bulgaria is the only one simultaneously meeting several different criteria, e.g. it is another 'Balkan country' of similar language and culture as the majority of the 'countries in focus' which would facilitate experience exchange, directly borders more than one of them, has not yet been involved in other regional co-operation scheme (Hungary and Romania are Parties to the Carpathian Convention) and, last but not least, has not been involved in the past ethnic conflicts of the 1990's.

Furthermore, in the light of the soon expected accession of Bulgaria to the European Union - its involvement in regional cooperation in the Balkans could facilitate the support of the EU financial mechanisms for future common regional activities, where Bulgaria would be eligible to play the 'lead partner' role.

1.2. Description of the project

As the first step, a rapid assessment of the general state-of-environment, as well as managerial problems experienced by the administrative bodies responsible for the protected areas' management was carried out. The resulting "Enhancing Transboundary Biodiversity Management in South Eastern Europe" report will be used to as a basis for an EnvSec programme to improve the protection and management of protected areas with a transboundary impact, and for raising support from the relevant EU agencies and other potential donors for this work.

The ultimate objective is the establishment of a network of mountain protected areas and transboundary Peace Park(s). Emphasis should be put on capacity-building for environmental and biodiversity protection and management, particularly of transboundary nature, and ecosystem level management. The process would foster a better understanding between the countries of the region and reduce security tensions by involving stakeholders of all ethnic backgrounds in the development of protected area management plans, as well as, the management of the protected areas themselves.

2. Background - physical characteristics and socio-economic overview

2.1. Physical characteristics of the region

The project area is composed of six relatively small countries or territories inhabited together by 19 million people. The joint area of these six countries is roughly only twice the size of neighbouring Bulgaria, used in this report as a 'reference country'. It means that protection of biodiversity of this region densely divided by state borders will not be possible without concerted actions in particular countries, without transboundary and regional co-operation.

The vast majority of the project area is covered by the Dinaric mountain range with the highest peak of Mt. Korabi (2 764 m) in Albania. A small part of the area in the northeast belongs to the Carpathian mountain range and in the southeast to the Rhodope Mountains.

Table 1. Project area - territory size, population and neighbouring countries.

Country or territory	Land surface		Approx. population number (millions)	Neighbouring countries / territories
	area (km ²)	per cent share of project area		
Albania	28 750	13.827	3.4	Greece, Kosovo (UNMIK), Macedonia, Montenegro
Bosnia and Herzegovina	51 129	24.590	3,5	Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia
Kosovo (UNMIK)	10 905	5.245	1.9	Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia
Macedonia	25 713	12.367	2.0	Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo (UNMIK), Serbia
Montenegro	13 812	6.643	0.7	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo (UNMIK), Serbia
Serbia	77 612	37.328	7.5	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Kosovo(UNMIK), Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania
Project region total	207 921	100.00	19.0	
Bulgaria	110 912		7.8	Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Turkey

Lowlands are to be found only in the far north of the area in the Danube, Sava, Tisa and Morava river valleys on the territories of Serbia and Bosnia, and close to the Adriatic coast in Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania.

The project area belongs to the water catchment basins of the three seas - Adriatic, Black and Aegean. Another important features of the area are the three big lakes shared by neighbouring countries: the Ohrid Lake (Albania and Macedonia), the Prespa Lake (Albania, Greece and Macedonia) and the Shkodra Lake (Albania and Montenegro).

2.2. Brief socio-economic characteristics of the region

The project area, like all other European mountainous regions, suffers from ongoing exodus of the rural population to the cities; this process began right after the 2nd world war, but became particularly intensive since the time of ethnic and military conflicts in the region. Therefore vast areas in the Dinaric mountain range became to large extent depopulated, and the traditional land-use forms and traditional way of life are on the decline, which has a direct influence on the changes of structure and dynamic of mountain ecosystems. The situation in the often overpopulated cities is additionally complicated due to the large number of refugees from other countries and internally displaced citizens.

Agriculture has always been an important sector of the local economies, but the industry, mining and manufacturing had the prevailing share in the gross domestic product of several project countries. In 1990's most of the described countries or territories have been directly or indirectly involved in the ethnic conflicts that escalated in the Balkan region.

This had an immediate negative effect on their economies, both as the result of war damages to industry and infrastructure and of economic sanctions and isolation from the global economy, which resulted in economic recession in most Balkan countries. The industry has not yet regained its capacities of the pre-war times (e.g. only $\frac{1}{3}$ of the previous industrial capacity in Bosnia and Herzegovina), which has influence on the income, welfare and employment levels. Furthermore, the ongoing transition from former socialist economic policies towards market-oriented and privatisation often results in growing unemployment rate.

Resulting from the above, the gross domestic product per capita in many countries of the region is around US\$ 1,000 or even lower (e.g. in Kosovo). All countries in transition currently face serious socio-economic challenges, and the situation when more than half of the country's labour force remains unemployed and therefore the prevailing number of families lives below the official poverty line is not surprising, especially in rural areas. Quite often remittances received from family members working abroad are the main basis of livelihood for the families remaining in the country.

Thus, the pressure on the use of natural resources is enormously high, which often leads to uncontrolled and unsustainable economic activities causing negative environmental impacts in the region, e.g. illegal logging in forests. In the given situation, confronted with other urgent needs and challenges environmental issues like biodiversity conservation receive much less attention than e.g. development and are not high on the priority list. This situation will not significantly change until nature conservation is linked with the sustainable local economic development, e.g. the development of nature-based tourism bringing income to the residents of communities inside and around protected areas.

3. Species biodiversity of the region

The region harbours an exceptional wealth of biodiversity of flora and fauna, with a great number of either Balkan, Dinaric or local endemic species, well preserved especially in the remote mountain areas. Many plant and animal species are of either global or European conservation importance, e.g. those listed in Annexes to the EC Habitat Directive.

Simultaneously, a large number of species already became extinct in the region while the occurrence of some other species is seriously endangered and threatened, mostly due to still increasing anthropogenic pressure. Usually, according to the wider international experience, protection of such species e.g. by granting them a legal protective status by listing them in official bulletins is not necessarily effective unless their whole habitats are protected and the whole ecosystems are prevented from being seriously damaged by the influence of human economic activities. Such ecosystem and habitat protection allowing these threatened species to survive is possible only in areas, where human influence is limited - in protected areas.

4. Protected area system development in the region

The protected area system throughout the project region can be best described as relatively well developed in terms of area coverage, and with the high potential to be further developed by extending the already existing protected areas and by establishing the new ones. The current share of protected area system in the project region area is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Share of protected areas in the project area.

Country or territory	Land surface		Share of PAs in country or territory area (per cent)	Share of PAs in total protected area of the project region (per cent)
	Total area (km ²)	Protected areas (PAs) (km ²)		
Albania	28 750	1 666.91	5.80	18.29
Bosnia and Herzegovina	51 129	307.67	0.60	3.38
Kosovo (UNMIK)	10 905	462.47	4.24	5.08
Macedonia	25 713	1 702.35	6.62	18.68
Montenegro	13 812	1 058.75	7.67	11.62
Serbia	77 612	3 913.55	5.04	42.95
Project region total	207 921	9 111.70	4.38	100.00
Bulgaria	110 912	5 830.38	5.26	

The share of all areas under legal protection in the whole project area is 4.38 per cent; this index varies among particular countries, from 0.6 per cent of the total country area in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 7.67 per cent in Montenegro. In terms of the area - protected areas of Serbia constitute as much as 42.95 per cent of all protected areas of the region, while, similar in size, Macedonia and Albania contribute to the regional protected area system with a similar acreage of areas under protection, each accounting for more than 18 per cent of the total. Therefore, areas protected in the three above mentioned countries constitute almost 80 per cent of the protected areas in the region. Of course, the smaller size of area under protection in remaining countries or territories does not stand for lower or less important biodiversity values, or for the lower political commitment to nature conservation, and the case of e.g. Montenegro is well illustrating the above 'disclaimer'.

As most countries and territories included in the project area understand the necessity to increase the number and/or size of their protected areas, the above shown proportions would most probably change in the nearest future. For instance, should the plans to extend the existing or establish new protected areas be implemented - the above index for Albania would reach almost 15.15 per cent of the country area (currently 5.80 per cent) and for Montenegro as much as 26.31 per cent of the country area (currently 7.67 per cent).

However, it has to be stressed that the combined knowledge of scientists, appreciation of natural values of the new territories proposed for protection and the enthusiasm of environmental NGOs are not the only necessary pre-conditions for such ambitious changes. Initiatives concerning such considerable extension of protected areas would never be successful without the nation-wide consensus, understanding and support, which will then foster political commitment of the decision-makers and allow implementing such changes.

Therefore, significant extension of protected areas would require reaching the adequate level of awareness among the whole society, but also determining the proper legal solutions for the newly proposed or much enlarged protected areas, allowing a compromise with the present land-users. Depending on the tourist attractiveness of the park and accessibility of its location, the local inhabitants and entrepreneurs, especially those involved in tourist services sector (e.g. infrastructure owners, service providers or tour-operators) may significantly increase their incomes, as the 'national park label' becomes still more attractive marketing brand, also in the south-eastern Europe.

Within the project area there is a wide range of different legal designations for protected areas, namely national parks, nature parks, strict nature reserves, resource reserves, special reserves, nature landscape reserves, managed nature reserves, nature monuments, sites of special natural character (serving for species protection), memorial nature monuments, protected landscapes and protected seascapes.

It has to be noted here, that comparisons can hardly be made even within a group of protected areas bearing apparently 'the same' legal designation of e.g. a national park. Even though each area designated as the 'national park' usually matches the criteria for the IUCN Category II, the categorisation system is mostly based on the ultimate purpose of area designation.

In fact, a national park 'label' does not say much about the set of legal and operational arrangements perceived in a particular country as the right solution and tool to accomplish the conservation goal set up for the area called a 'national park'. Due to different national legislation national parks in particular countries may have completely different legal powers, duties, functions and law enforcement tools. For instance, fundamental legal powers either delegated to the national park administration for the entire park area or limited to certain areas only are the land ownership and management rights, especially important for parks including forest ecosystems.

Furthermore, for many reasons, detailed maps and resource inventories as well as technically advanced management planning tools (like the digitalised geographical information system, aerial photos, satellite images etc.) and comprehensive management plans may not yet be available for national park managers in all countries of the region. Again, very much depending on legislation, institutional arrangements and funding possibilities for national parks in different countries - the operational capacity may significantly vary between parks.

Therefore a pair of national parks located on either side of the state border may have completely incomparable number and professional composition of staff, budgets, administrative and research facilities, field equipment, or management procedures.

Depending on the location national parks may have very different operational context, to large extent influencing its management objectives and possible conservation measures. For example, a park located in a remote and scarcely populated region can operate in a very different manner than the park surrounded by numerous communities, where decisions on either the land-use or land development have to take into account the needs and rights of local population to use natural resources of the area. Last but not least, national parks in different countries may have a completely different level of social support, both by the whole society and by the local inhabitants. This is why there are in fact no 'two similar national parks', at least not in Europe.

It should be noted here, that the vast majority of protected areas existing today in the region are relatively small areas of less than 10 000 ha. Such small areas may be suitable for protection of e.g. landscape phenomena or threatened plant species, but rather not for protection of representative larger fragments of valuable mountain ecosystems and habitats, and definitely not for protecting populations of large mammals, especially carnivorous ones.

Therefore, all current initiatives aiming at the extension of already existing protected areas and establishing new large-scale protected areas are indispensable for protecting the best preserved natural areas of the Balkans - the 'crown jewels' of the Dinaric Mountains for next generations.

Protecting larger parts of the most important ecosystems and habitats of the region is mainly possible in existing and planned large-scale protected areas, most often bearing the national park designation.

Currently existing terrestrial large-scale protected areas in the project region are the national parks Sutjeska (17 350 ha) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sharr Mountains (39 000 ha) in the territory of Kosovo (UNMIK), Mavrovo (73 088 ha) Galicica (22 750 ha), and Pelister (12 500 ha) in Macedonia, Durmitor (32 000 ha) in Montenegro, Djerdap (63 608 ha), Fruska Gora (25 393 ha), Tara (19 175 ha) and Kopaonik (11 810 ha) in Serbia.

The above listed 10 national parks together encompass the area of 316 674 ha, which accounts for as much as some 34.75 per cent of all areas currently protected in the region. Finally, the picture will not be full without mentioning big national parks protecting important aquatic ecosystems like the Lake Prespa (27 750 ha) in Albania or the Skadar Lake (40 000 ha) in Montenegro. Possibly similar role could also be performed by larger protected areas with similar legal arrangements and operational capacities to national parks, like the Stara Planina Mts. Nature Park in Serbia (142 220 ha) which is currently the largest protected area of the project region. Therefore, large-scale protected areas cover at present almost 58 per cent of all areas currently protected in the project region. There are also several bigger strict nature reserves in the region, e.g. in Macedonia.

There is a big potential for a large-scale protected area in the Bjeshkët e Nemuna / Prokletije Mountains region shared by Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo (UNMIK) together with the adjacent Mokra Gora mountain range shared by Serbia, Kosovo (UNMIK) and Montenegro where more or less concerted actions undertaken on either side may result in establishing one of the largest protected areas of the south-eastern Europe.

Currently the areas protected in the region of Bjeshkët e Nemuna / Prokletije Mountains are the two relatively small national parks 'the Valley of Valbona' (8 000 ha) and 'Thethi' (2 630 ha) and a strict nature reserve 'Gashi River' (3 000 ha), so that only 13 630 hectares are protected, solely on the Albanian side. However, Albania considers the possibility of merging the two national parks and significantly extending their area which (including the Gashi River strict nature reserve) would allow to protect the whole natural complex of the 'Albanian Alps' encompassing 38 000 ha.

Simultaneously Montenegro plans the designation of the Prokletije Mts. as a new national park of the approximate size of 14 000 ha, and Kosovo (UNMIK) proposes to designate a new Bjeshkët e Nemuna national park with an area of some 50 000 ha.

Should all the above initiatives be successfully implemented - the trilateral Bjeshkët e Nemuna / Prokletije Mountains protected area would jointly cover 102 000 ha, constitute the one of largest protected areas in this part of Europe and be somehow co-financed by three state budgets. In addition to the above Serbia plans designation of the northwestern slopes of the neighbouring Mt. Mokra Gora mountain range as a protected landscape area.

A similar or even more potential spectacular 'success story' is also very possible close to Prokletije Mts. in the Sharr Mountains adjacent to the Korab Massif, in possible co-operation between Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo (UNMIK). In this region large-scale protected areas already exist on two sides of the border (in Macedonia and Kosovo) and establishment of another protected area is planned on the third side (in Albania). This potential transboundary protected area in Korab Massif and neighbouring Sharr Mountains could reach the size of some 200 000 hectares together in all three countries, and therefore be one of the largest European protected areas.

It has to be noted, that establishing large scale protected areas like big national parks always means both direct and indirect costs for the state budget (therefore for the tax-payers) of the country, as such areas become most often withdrawn from regular economic use. Such costs often include expenditures on land acquisition, compensations paid to landowners and users, environmental investments and facilities' construction, scientific research and development of the management plan as well as continuous expenses on park maintenance and protective measures' implementation. Simultaneously, the state budget revenues formerly originating in a particular area (e.g. from timber harvesting or mining concessions) tend to decrease.

Designation of a new protected area of similar size by one country alone, at least within the project area does not seem to be feasible, while concerted efforts of e.g. two or more partners may result in such a spectacular success for biodiversity protection. This is why establishing large-scale transboundary protected areas seems to be a solution acceptable also from the point of view of the state budgets of particular involved countries of the region.

However, as preserving the biodiversity of the region is considered to be important not only for the involved governments but also for the whole European and global community - the efforts aimed at establishing large-scale protected areas in the Balkan region would hopefully be supported by external funding sources.

5. Legal and policy framework in the region

In general, biodiversity and protected area issues are present within the national legislation of all countries included in the project, and a similar legal framework is currently either being already enforced or still developed for Kosovo (UNMIK). In the majority of countries legal acts related to biodiversity issues have been either adopted or amended in the last few years, this is why most probably they incorporate recent approaches towards nature protection. Several countries of the project region adopted special legal acts on protected areas, while in other cases protected area issues are usually governed by the law on nature protection.

At least two countries of the region (Macedonia and Montenegro) initiated transposition of the EU standards on nature protection issues (e.g. of the 'Habitat' and 'Bird' EEC Directives) into their national legislation, while Bulgaria has successfully incorporated such provisions in preparation for its accession to the European Union expected in 2007.

However, in many countries biodiversity related issues are often fragmented among different legal acts. Furthermore, the legislation is often criticised for still existing gaps (e.g. concerning protected area management). This is why several countries (e.g. Montenegro and Serbia) currently plan harmonisation of their legislation related to nature protection, sometimes by developing new legal acts. This is a particularly vital task for Montenegro and Serbia, as the legislation on nature protection has not been updated for many years, for instance the law on nature protection currently in force in Montenegro dates back to 1982. Similarly, legal acts currently in force regulating protected area issues were adopted as long ago as in 1991 in Montenegro and in 1993 in Serbia.

It has to be stressed that even the best legal framework for nature protection will remain only a virtual success unless the law on protected areas and species is effectively enforced, and protected areas are equipped with adequate legal powers, properly designed, structured, staffed and financed and, last but not least, supported by the society.

With the exception of Kosovo (UNMIK) all countries of the project area are Parties to numerous international conventions related to biodiversity, especially the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Two other international agreements, namely the Ramsar Convention and the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes are also of particular importance for the region, due to several big lakes and wetlands shared by neighbouring countries (e.g. Skadersko/Shkodra Lake, Ohrid Lake, Prespa Lake, Bilecko Lake, Hutovo Blato) or numerous rivers (e.g. Danube, Drina, Drin, Sava, Vardar) either constituting or crossing state borders in the region.

From the biodiversity point of view it would be important that all countries and territories of the project area ratify the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern) and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (Bonn / CMS), together with EUROBATS (Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats under the Bonn Convention) which could strengthen nature conservation instruments, in particular species and habitat conservation and protected area systems. Should all countries and territories of the project area ratify the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Århus) the role of non-governmental organisations of the region could become significantly strengthened, fostering common initiatives undertaken in the eco-regional scale.

Only few countries of the region are Parties to regional environment-driven conventions, like the Convention on Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Use of the River Danube or the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians. Future common actions aimed at protecting the overall biological diversity of the project area perceived as one coherent eco-region may require developing a special regional agreement - e.g. 'the Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Balkans'.

Another legal tool for enhancing transboundary cooperation could be bilateral or multilateral agreements, either of a general nature or focusing on particular transboundary areas, signed at governmental or ministerial level, like the Memorandum of Understanding in the field of environment protection and sustainable development signed between Albania and Montenegro, or the MoU on protection of the Stara Planina region between FRY and Bulgaria. Similar protocols can facilitate cooperation between two or more regional governments, nature conservation authorities or agencies, administrations of neighbouring protected areas from each side of the state border, scientific institutions involved in transboundary field research or neighbouring local community administrations from different countries.

Each country or territory within the project area already developed or is elaborating relevant strategic documents related to national policies towards environmental, nature conservation and sustainable development issues, like e.g. NEAP's (the National Environmental Strategy and Action Plan), the National Biological Diversity Conservation Strategy or the Environmental Protection and Sustainable Economic Development Strategy.

One of the most important next steps should be identifying common strategic priorities and challenges that should be faced together by all countries of the project area, actions which can not be accomplished by one country alone, where regional or transboundary cooperation would be indispensable for the protection of nature and biological diversity of the whole Balkan eco-region.

6. Institutional structure for biodiversity in the region

Competencies of various central level governmental agencies concerning protected area management are sometimes overlapping, like in the case of Albania where the governmental agency responsible for protected area management is the Directorate of Nature Protection of the Ministry of Environment, but their administration remains a 'traditional' task of the forest service reporting to the Directorate of Protected Areas within the Directorate General of Forests and Pastures. However, this inconsistency is supposed to be eliminated by the recently introduced changes in legislation.

Most probably, due to the possible inconsistency between different legal acts currently in force in Montenegro - protected area management is executed by the Public Enterprise for National Parks and by Forestry Directorates in the case of remaining protected area categories, and not by the legally mandated Institute for Nature Protection. On the other hand, management and application of protective measures in 49 protected areas and sites of Montenegro covering together 105 875 ha would most probably remain well beyond the operational and administrative capacities of the Institute, previously tasked only with scientific research. Enforcement of this legal delegation would become even more problematic in the light of the planned extension of protected areas to the total area of 363 375 ha accounting for 26.31 per cent of the total area of the country.

The situation apparently seems to be less complicated in Kosovo (UNMIK) where the Nature Protection Division of the Environment Department of the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, specifically the Unit for Conservation of Natural Values is responsible for management of protected areas, including the national park/s. However, it has to be noted that the protected area system is still under development, currently there is only one national park within the whole Kosovo territory, and its management is disjointed among the two competing management structures, due to the still vital ethnic conflict.

A general trend in the project region is that national parks, as the most prominent protected area category, usually have their own management unit and staff, and are subordinate to the Ministry relevant for the environmental issues, while other protected area categories are managed by the forestry service reporting to the Ministry relevant for forestry and agricultural issues.

The above rule is clearly visible e.g. in the case of Serbia where management authorities for national parks are established by the Government as a 'special public enterprise' while protected areas other than national parks are managed by public enterprises responsible for the forests. Similarly, in neighbouring Bulgaria the management authorities for national parks report to the Ministry of Environment and Water (MEW) while other protected areas like nature parks, natural landmarks and protected sites are managed by forestry authorities of either the national, regional or local level.

Furthermore, at least in the case of several countries within the scope of this project, the national park authorities do not have the full land ownership and management rights, especially in forestry areas included into the park, even in the case of the state-owned forests, where the forestry administration or the public forestry enterprises manage the forest ecosystems within the national park area.

The Carpathian experience shows that a situation when nature conservation authorities have limited land ownership and management rights over the state-owned part of the national park area may often lead to conflicts of interests between nature conservation requirements and the management goals of other stakeholders, executing land management rights inside the national park.

Even in the case when a national or nature park has its own management authority responsible for the protection of nature and biodiversity in a particular area - the situation when protected area managers can rely on updated and legally binding long-term management plans developed on the basis of comprehensive nature inventories and field researches is most probably not always the case here. The same relates to the availability and use of sophisticated management planning tools like the GIS digital databases or the aerial photos and satellite imagery with full interpretation. Most probably not all protected areas of the project region can afford to employ highly qualified specialists, scientists and researchers, operate well developed monitoring systems on nature and environment, or have adequate field research facilities and laboratories.

This is why the role of various institutions providing scientific support to protected area managers, such as the Institute for Nature Conservation in Serbia, the Kosovo Institute for Nature Protection or the Institute for Nature Protection in Montenegro must not be undervalued, both in developing the protected area systems in particular countries and in continuous support for already operating protected areas e.g. by designing the appropriate protective measures for particular ecosystems, habitats and species.

Protected areas of the region have very different operational capacities, number of staff, level of state budget funding allocated for the running costs of the administration or for management plan implementation; and some of them may even lack basic office and field equipment or necessary relevant law enforcement instruments.

Last but not least, most probably each protected area of the region operates in different socio-economic context and under different economic conditions, has different working relations with local communities and authorities, or with local and nation-wide non-governmental organisations, receives different support from local inhabitants and business, has different publicity in national and international media, and different level of recognition by international organisations.

This is why the current efficiency of protected area systems as well as up-to-date performance and operational capacities of particular protected areas in countries within the scope of this project may not always be adequate and satisfactory, keeping in mind all future challenges and threats for the unique biodiversity of the Balkans.

7. Threats to biodiversity in regional scale

The loss of biodiversity is ongoing in all countries within the scope of this project. It is important to stress that the unique biodiversity of the Balkans is not only a treasure shared by the countries of the region but its protection is also a common responsibility.

Some of the threats negatively affect the whole territories of countries in focus, however their intensity may vary between the countries and particular regions.

The common general threats to environment of the project area are as follows:

- unsustainable use of natural resources,
- unsustainable management of forests and illegal logging,
- inadequate river basin management affecting aquatic ecosystems,
- drainage of wetlands and destruction of aquatic river ecosystems,
- loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitats due to urbanisation and land development,
- loss of native plant and animal species, both wild species and traditional breeds,
- introduction of alien invasive species of flora and fauna into ecological system,
- pressure of tourism on biodiversity of the mountain, coastal and marine ecosystems,
- pollution of the environment by industrial and agricultural pollutants, and municipal waste,
- insufficient law enforcement, in particular in physical planning and preventing illegal activities threatening the state of environment and integrity of nature.

All the above general environmental problems have direct negative effect on biodiversity of the entire region. Furthermore, the geographical range of influence of most major environmental threats extends well beyond the state borders of respective countries and territories.

Simultaneously all countries of the region face similar impediments for improving the current state of environment, nature and biodiversity within the reasonable timeframe, due to the common problems listed below:

- low level of public awareness on biodiversity issues, resulting in low public support for nature protection initiatives, which causes the lack of political interest and support;
- missing adequate legal and policy framework for biodiversity conservation;
- missing coordination and cooperation between governmental agencies and authorities;
- inadequate level of funding and technical support for biodiversity researches and nature conservation in general, resulting in the absence of nature monitoring systems, unavailability of databases and inventories on nature, lack of management plans and means for their implementation;
- isolation of the scientific community and limited contacts with neighbouring countries;
- lack of highly qualified and motivated personnel and general lack of adequate skills in administering and managing biodiversity conservation activities and projects;
- inefficient management framework for protected areas, overlapping of competencies,
- missing tools and incentives for sustainable nature-based tourism development;
- lack of support for civil society groups e.g. NGOs working on biodiversity conservation.

It is important to stress, that most of the above threats to environment, nature and biodiversity as well as obstacles for improving the current state are common for all involved countries. Simultaneously some of these threats can not be mitigated and controlled by respective countries alone, and the need for joint actions to be undertaken at a regional scale seems to be obvious.

One of the possible solutions would be to initiate the process of regional consultations between all countries of the region in order to identify and agree upon common priorities for action. This could further lead towards signing bilateral, multilateral and regional agreements on cooperation in environment and nature protection, fostering conservation of the biodiversity at eco-regional scale. Furthermore, ratification of a regional framework convention (the 'Balkan Convention', like the Alpine or Carpathian ones) would facilitate harmonisation of sectoral policies of involved countries for the benefit of the whole Balkan region.

However, it has to be noted that reaching such necessary region-wide agreement would require high-level political commitment and several years of consultations and negotiations while the biodiversity loss continues.

Furthermore, implementation of either common regional or national strategies and action plans on the major environmental issues like e.g. river basin management, forestry or pollution control will require extensive and continuous funding which may not be possible in the nearest future in the situation when environmental issues receive less attention than development needs perceived as priorities in countries facing severe socio-economic challenges. Therefore, protecting the overall biodiversity of all the involved countries and territories will only be possible if priority actions are taken immediately.

Both for natural reasons like e.g. topography of the region and due to man-made changes in the environment the biodiversity values are unevenly 'distributed' within the territories of particular countries of the region. Some areas are intensively managed, cultivated, industrialised or urbanised and retain little biodiversity compared to some other areas, not yet seriously affected by development and remaining much closer to the natural state. Protected areas, either already existing or proposed ones are such centres of high biodiversity concentration, the last islands of respectively well protected nature and biodiversity, and important reservoirs of the genetic material.

Protected areas are again unevenly distributed within the region, the majority of them is located in remote and less accessible areas like mountains, and therefore less attractive for economic activities like agriculture or for urbanisation. Nevertheless, the presence of the already existing protected areas is often perceived as a constraint for the local economic development due to the imposed restriction on the use of land and natural resources of the area.

Simultaneously, there is little understanding of the similarity between the strategic decision on the designation of protected areas excluded from the regular economic and commercial activities and the strategic decisions undertaken by each family on spending part of the family budget and saving the remaining part of the family income on e.g. banking accounts as future reserves.

Each nation retains the full right to decide on the current and future land use of the country's territory, and on designating protected areas. On the other hand, each nation retains the right to decide on the later withdrawal of the protective status of a particular area, either in a situation when its natural values significantly deteriorated and no longer deserve protection or in the case when the use of its natural resources becomes an absolute necessity for the benefit of the nation.

In the light of the above statements it is also important to remember that the decision on safekeeping national treasures including nature and biodiversity has to be taken in the proper time. The importance of proper timing for decisions on nature and biodiversity protection may well be illustrated by using a simple example of the irreversible course of matters: a forest currently included into a protected area and excluded from the commercial use at present can always be harvested for commercial purposes or even cut down and turned into a residential area in the future, while the recovery of the former biodiversity of this area will become a mission impossible once the forest is no longer in place, the habitat is lost, its vegetation is destroyed, the wildlife is either gone or killed and the area is turned into an urban residential district.

Therefore a strategic decision, based on the deep knowledge of natural resources of each country within the scope of this project, on whether the existing protected area system already includes all important 'national natural treasures' or should be further extended in order to maintain remaining areas of high biodiversity values close to their natural shape has to be independently undertaken by each Government.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the project region has the high potential for protecting even more natural areas of high biodiversity values than those designated until today. The share of all areas under legal protection in the whole project area is currently 4.38 per cent, this index varies among countries from 0.6 per cent of the country area for Bosnia and Herzegovina to 7.67 per cent for Montenegro.

No matter the project area encompasses not only mountain regions it should be mentioned that the fact that only 16 per cent of the area of the Carpathian Mountains is under different forms of legal protection is a current concern of environmentalists from the Carpathian countries.

Should the recent plans to extend the existing or establish new protected areas be implemented in the Balkan region the above index for Albania would reach almost 15.15 per cent of the country area (currently 5.80 per cent) and for Montenegro as much as 26.31 per cent of the country area (currently 7.67 per cent).

Protection of biodiversity of the region within the protected area system seems to be the most obvious and feasible priority task for all involved countries. However, there are numerous threats to biodiversity common for the vast majority of protected areas within the scope of the project.

Examples of such common threats are as follows:

- unsustainable management of forests and illegal logging inside protected areas,
- poaching of rare wildlife species, illegal wildlife trade and uncontrolled collection of medicinal plant species inside protected areas,
- development pressures related to housing and technical infrastructure e.g. illegal construction activities inside protected areas,
- development pressures related to tourist infrastructure development not accompanied by relevant environmental investments like e.g. sewage treatment plants,
- pressure of uncontrolled tourism on the mountain, coastal and marine ecosystems.

The above clearly indicates the need for providing protected area management authorities with more efficient law enforcement tools and better coordination mechanisms with other authorities responsible for the state of environment and physical planning.

Simultaneously the vast majority of protected areas within the scope of this project, responsible for protection of the areas most important for conservation of the biodiversity of the Balkan region are confronted with the lack of funds for monitoring the state of nature, the status of rare and threatened species, and of natural habitats, resulting in non-availability of nature inventories, maps and management plans for protected areas.

Furthermore, the level of funding for nature conservation projects on e.g. rare species or habitat preservation as well as the core administrative and maintenance costs by the state budget is inadequate. Existing protected areas can not afford to employ highly qualified personnel and specialists. Therefore, in order to enable them to effectively protect the biodiversity of the region the operational capacities of protected areas must be strengthened.

Border areas of the Balkans, partly as a result of their peripheral location within particular countries or due political factors banning development in the past are often the most favoured regions in biodiversity terms. Ecological problems occurring in border areas (like those concerning forestry or river basin management) can not be solved by one country alone, and require regional cooperation. Transboundary protected areas provide for the ecological continuum beyond these virtual political boundaries and a tool for international cooperation.

This is why cooperation on a regional scale and common actions aimed at nature conservation in existing and potential transboundary protected areas are indispensable for the preservation of the biodiversity of the countries involved in this project.

8. Transboundary cooperation in the region

In the situation where no international convention or other multilateral region-wide agreement on biodiversity and nature conservation has been signed for the Balkans, transboundary cooperation on biodiversity is sometimes based on bilateral agreements and cooperation arrangements.

Such bilateral agreements may be of a general nature like the Memorandum of Understanding in the field of environment protection and sustainable development signed on 9th May 2003 between the Minister of Environment of the Republic of Albania and the Minister of Environment Protection and Physical Planning of the Republic of Montenegro, thus establishing a legal framework for cooperation. Another bilateral agreement signed in 1996 between several Bulgarian ministries and the Ministry competent for environmental protection of Yugoslavia focused on particular transboundary area, it was the memorandum of understanding on establishing a transboundary 'Peace Park' in the Stara Planina region.

Countries of the project area participate in international programs implemented under the auspices of ratified conventions, like e.g. the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention). In 2002 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia started setting up the Emerald Network - a network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCI) for Europe by taking part in the Emerald Network Pilot Project coordinated by the European Environment Agency in the framework of CARDS 2002 Regional Programme "Strengthening the EIONET in Western Balkan Countries".

Similarly, under the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians the Djerdap National Park in Serbia would soon be able to cooperate not only with the neighbouring Portile de Fier Natural Park located across the Danube River in Romania but also with other Carpathian protected areas in Romania, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic, to be included in the planned Carpathian Network of Protected Areas, cooperating with the Alpine Network of Protected Areas.

Large conservation-oriented projects supported by external funding sources often provide sound incentives for multilateral cooperation on environmental issues, like the PIN MATRA project on integrated management of Sava river basin involving Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia.

Another example could be the Indicative Map of Pan European Ecological Network (PEEN) in South-Eastern Europe, coordinated by European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC) and involving Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey. This project implemented between July 2003 and May 2006 aimed at identification of the most important natural areas for the South Eastern Europe (SEE) for inclusion into the Pan European Ecological Network, designating adequate buffer zones, and establishing spatial linkages (e.g. ecological corridors and 'stepping stones') providing for connectivity between the dispersed populations of flagship species.

There is also a wide range of different cooperative actions involving one or more countries of the project area and a supporting partner (usually an international organisation), for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina the UNDP supports a biodiversity research and conservation project in Livanjsko Polje area, UNEP/GRID assists in capacity building for environmental information management, and the Regional Environmental Centre (REC) supports activities of the Environmental Steering Committee and the process of establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency.

There are also several transboundary cooperation projects and initiatives focusing on the protection of lakes and wetlands shared by particular countries of the region. The World Bank Global Environmental Facility (GEF) supported a project 'Integrated ecosystem management of the Skadar Lake' (Montenegro and Albania) aimed at preventing pollution and protection of natural resources. Another GEF-funded project on the protection of the Ohrid Lake and its catchment area was followed by signing a bilateral cooperation agreement between Macedonia and Albania, a common bilateral management body is currently being established. The World Bank GEF and the German KfW Entwicklungsbank supported the project on protection and joint management of the Prespa Lake (Macedonia, Albania and Greece). Furthermore, the Hutovo Blato wetland area, designated as a Ramsar site is the area of cooperation on environmental issues between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia

There is also a number of planned transboundary activities, e.g. Macedonia plans to initiate a new project on improvement of transboundary water management (CARDS 2003), implementation of the GEF-funded project in the Crni Drim river basin (Macedonia and Albania), implementation of the project supported by the Interreg IIIB CADSES on sustainable management of the Strumica / Struma river basin (Macedonia and Bulgaria).

Other activities currently planned by Macedonia are the nature inventories and valorisation of the transboundary mountain ranges of Kožuf (Macedonia and Greece), Šar Planina (Macedonia and Kosovo UNMIK), Korab (Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo UNMIK), Maleševske (Macedonia and Bulgaria) and Belasica Mountains (Macedonia, Bulgaria and Greece), fostering their future protection.

Other examples of transboundary cooperation in the project region are mainly initiatives focusing on particular transboundary natural area like the West Stara Planina (Bulgaria and Serbia), Drina - Tara Planina (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) or Vlahina - Maleševske - Belasica (Macedonia, Bulgaria and Greece).

There is also an area within the scope of this project where transboundary cooperation was developed as a result of the bottom-up initiative, to be hopefully supported by the authorities of the neighbouring countries / territories - the case of the 'Balkans Peace Parks Project' in the Prokletije / Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountain region of Albania, Kosovo (UNMIK) and Montenegro.

Working relationships with the governments seem to be most crucial for the future of this 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 (UNMIK) 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.

9. Regional recommendations

General recommendations for all countries within the scope of the project are as follows:

- ratification of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern) and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (Bonn) by all countries of the region, which could strengthen nature conservation instruments, in particular species and habitat conservation, and protected area systems;
- updating environmental laws and integration of biodiversity conservation issues into relevant sectoral or cross-sectoral policies, programmes and action plans, in particular into policies related to physical planning, forestry, agriculture and fisheries;
- elimination of legislation gaps and inconsistencies between different legal acts, currently resulting either in the lack of relevant regulations or in overlapping competencies of various central level governmental agencies, in particular concerning protected area management issues;
- implementing more efficient coordination mechanisms between authorities responsible for the state of environment, nature conservation and physical planning;
- development and implementation of more efficient law enforcement mechanisms to prevent unsustainable management of forests and illegal logging, poaching of rare wildlife species, illegal wildlife trade and uncontrolled collection of medicinal plant species, illegal or environmentally harmful development and construction activities and uncontrolled tourist pressure on mountain, coastal and marine ecosystems, in particular inside protected areas by providing park rangers with adequate legal mandate for law enforcement;

- development of efficient legislative frameworks and institutional structures for protected area system management;
- development of information systems and databases on environment, nature and biodiversity, including nature inventories, wildlife censuses, geographic information systems (GIS);
- maintaining and improving the current operational capacities of protected area management authorities, also by providing adequate state budget funding for core administrative and maintenance costs;
- development of management plans for protected areas and supporting implementation of adopted management plan provisions;
- providing national park authorities with adequate legal powers for biodiversity and nature protection, including the full legal mandate for managing the state-owned land included into the national park area, in particular the state owned forests;
- capacity building for protected areas, including equipment, staff training, infrastructure (e.g. technical, research, educational and visitor infrastructure);
- allocating adequate state budget funding for nature monitoring and conservation projects, in particular on rare and threatened natural ecosystems, habitats, communities and species of flora and fauna;
- extension of already existing protected areas and establishing new large-scale protected areas;

Recommendations concerning transboundary and regional cooperation on biodiversity protection issues include:

- initiating the process of regional consultations between all countries of the region in order to identify and agree upon common priorities for action, which could further lead towards signing bilateral, multilateral and regional agreements on cooperation in environment and nature protection, fostering conservation of the biodiversity at eco-regional scale;
- signing bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements between two or more central or regional governments, nature conservation authorities or agencies, administrations of neighbouring protected areas from each side of the state border, scientific institutions involved in transboundary field research or neighbouring local community administrations from different countries;
- increasing institutional and scientific cooperation between countries of the region related to the biodiversity protection, aimed at adopting and implementation of common policies, action plans, programmes and strategies, in particular for transboundary protected areas;
- supporting the existing transboundary cooperation arrangements in mountain regions;
- developing working relationships between protected area managers, local authorities and local inhabitants on either side of the state border;
- involving local municipalities, authorities and NGOs in project development and cooperation with neighbouring municipalities and NGOs across the border, e.g. by organising workshops in particular 'areas in focus' facilitating consultations between scientists, NGOs and local community participants;
- raising the institutional and personnel capacity for international cooperation, e.g. by training and exchange programs for the employees of park authorities, nature protection institutions, and NGO leaders involved in activities undertaken within transboundary protected areas and protected area networking;

- launching public media campaigns in order to rise awareness of inhabitants of border areas on the purposes and potential benefits from transboundary cooperation for local communities;
- cooperation on the development of integrated management plans for transboundary protected areas;
- working out common projects and joint approach towards possible financial sources;
- cooperation on the development of the Balkan eco- regional network of protected areas.

It is important to stress once more that most of the described threats to environment, nature and biodiversity as well as obstacles for improving the current state are common for all involved countries. Some of these threats can not be mitigated and controlled by respective countries alone, and the need for joint actions to be undertaken at a regional scale seems to be obvious. Future common actions aimed at protecting the overall biological diversity of the project area perceived as one coherent eco-region may require developing a special regional agreement e.g. 'the Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Balkans'.

Nevertheless, one of the most important next steps should be identifying common strategic priorities and challenges that should be faced together by all countries of the project area, actions which can not be accomplished by one country alone, where regional or transboundary cooperation would be indispensable for the protection of nature and biological diversity of the whole Balkan eco-region.

Successful transboundary cooperation requires not only understanding of the 'transboundary added value', legal agreements, administrative framework, financial support and allocating people and resources but also a 'new mental attitude' by thinking of the area as 'one coherent natural transboundary eco-region'. Such approach requires strengthening the common identity of the particular border region and building the capacity of all involved partners to cooperate, but provides for enhanced experience exchange and additional lobbying strength.

As regards funding, it has to be stressed, that transboundary co-operation can not be developed in long-term only on the 'project basis', as the 'project deadline' may easily become the 'co-operation deadline'. Therefore providing sustainable funding for transboundary cooperation by establishing regional or local environmental trust funds is the most recommended option, however such funds have to be well equipped from the very beginning, otherwise they would never become fully operational.

The real 'key to success' are in fact the people involved in common activities on nature protection. The success in transboundary cooperation is very much dependent on the enthusiasm of individual members of protected area staff for doing things together. Not much will happen if there is no spirit of cooperation between the partners across the border, no willingness to share experience and data, no practical incentives to collaborate or understanding of the potential benefits, and no intention to understand partner's different operational conditions or culture.

Before initiating any common activity, one must remember that a failure in transboundary co-operation is much more highly visible and at the same time the risk of failure is greater than usually. A failure of the first joint project can easily hamper future co-operation on other common priority issues. 'Success stories' and positive track record are fundamental for raising support for future common activities.

10. Recommendations on the proposed network of protected areas

The proposed network of protected areas in the Balkans (BNPA) would allow coordination of activities aimed at biological diversity protection undertaken in different countries, and developing common activities and projects.

Such a network will also facilitate knowledge, skills and experience exchange. By working together as a network, protected areas gain lobbying strength to promote nature protection. They can establish a common communication strategy and increase public awareness and support for nature protection. Common public relations is much more effective and convincing than undertaken by an individual protected area.

The first steps towards establishing a network of protected areas in the Balkans should be to:

- designate one official representative per country to the steering committee,
- information protected areas about this networking initiative,
- developing contact database (directory) of protected areas and contact persons,

All signatory countries should be equally involved from the very beginning in all initiatives aiming at promoting the Network for common benefit of all member protected areas. Furthermore, all initiatives and decisions regarding the network should be commonly elaborated, consulted with relevant authorities in all countries and approved by consensus of all country representatives.

Each country of the project area should contribute to Network operations, not only by co-financing commonly agreed-upon joint activities but, which may be even more important, also by bringing skills and expertise. Each country should identify fields of networking activities of its particular interest, or in which this particular country is most experienced and successful in order to contribute to the common network as well as to create the sense of ownership of the BNPA idea among protected area managers, scientists and practitioners from each cooperating country. Otherwise the participation of several countries can be weak and therefore the network would not represent the interests of all involved member protected areas.

Should this project be successful - biodiversity protection in European mountains will reach the 'A+B+C" stage, when cooperation of protected area networks will become possible between the Alps (A), the Balkans (B) and the Carpathians (C) linking the first two geographically.

For more detailed information on issues mentioned within this brief summary please refer to the full version of the report