

ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MACEDONIA: THE CASE STUDY OF THE GALICICA NATIONAL PARK*

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Galicica National Park (GNP) is a pioneer among the national parks in Macedonia in making the necessary paradigmatic shift towards sustainable management. The strategy of the park's authorities to diversify the sources of income and to advance the promotion and presentation of its values uses the ecotourism as the principle approach.

In the first part of the paper we shortly describe the wide surrounding of the GNP, the region of Lake Ohrid and the Prespa Lakes. In the following section we describe some of the most important projects and initiatives in the field of ecotourism development in the GNP and the region as a whole. We conclude with a short analysis of the experience and the lessons learned.

2 THE REGION OF LAKE OHRID AND THE PRESPA LAKES

GNP is situated in the region of Lake Ohrid and the Prespa Lakes, at the border intersection of Albania, Greece and Macedonia. The region accommodates Lake Ohrid and the Prespa Lakes, the oldest lakes in Europe (2 to 3 million years), and is recognized as one of the largest biological reserves in Europe. The flora in the region is composed of more than 1500 plant species: in the Galicica National Park alone there are 182 tree species. These exceptional natural resources have been subject to many conservation efforts and regimes in the past (see Figure 1).

Currently there are around 200.000 people living in the region, some 130.000 of which live on the Macedonian side. There are 14 villages within the park boundaries with some 4.000 citizens. Other 3 villages, within 1km outside the park boundaries, comprise approximately 5.000 people. About 10km eastwards is situated the city of Resen - the administrative center of the municipality of Resen with approximately 10.000 citizens, while on the north-western border is the city of Ohrid, with approximately 50.000 citizens. The region as a whole, but particularly the city of Ohrid and its vicinity, is one of the most famous tourist destinations in Macedonia. The number of overnight lodgings in 1995 was almost 400.000 in hotels, somewhat more than 250.000 in the camps and more than 700.000 in the private accommodation. These impressive numbers indicate the potential for development of tourism in the vicinity of the GNP, but also the type of tourism currently being preferred – the mass tourism.



Figure 1. Protected areas in the Region of Lake Ohrid and the Prespa Lakes

3 THE FIRST STEPS

However, the increasing exploitation and pressure on natural resources, inappropriate land-use practices, and uncoordinated sectoral policies and development activities threaten the unique natural values of this region. Recognizing the need for more sustainable and effective environmental management, the national governments and many international organizations and donors recently promoted the adoption of management concepts, such as integrated environmental management, ecosystem management, and ecotourism, as tools for a more sustainable use of the natural resources in the region.

With respect to ecotourism, both, national and international actors have played an important role in providing incentives and financial means. The initial impetus for development of ecotourism in the GNP came from the Lake Ohrid Conservation Project (LOCP) – an Albanian/Macedonian project for management of the Lake Ohrid watershed, financed by the Global Environment Facility through the World Bank. The feasibility study of this project, prepared by international consultants, identified a number of weaknesses in the management of the GNP:

* Presented at the regional conference: *Forum on Biodiversity and Tourism in South East Europe* (Sofia, Bulgaria, 20-22 November 2003), organized by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC).

- Unsuitable presentation of the natural values and traditions to the local population;
- Non-organized stay of the tourists;
- Absence of complete control over their activities;
- Absence of financial effects from the visits of the tourists;
- Low level of public consciousness of the local population and tourists; and
- Insufficient education of the local population and tourists.

Among the measures to mitigate these shortcomings, the Feasibility Study proposed a development of a regional tourism concept which uses the cultural and natural heritage in a more commercial way (e.g. entrance fee for cultural monuments and national parks; guided cultural, ecological and hiking tours; fee for tourists staying in hotels, private lodgings and camping sites, to be used for financing the preservation of cultural heritage, the maintenance of the national parks, the cleaning of the shoreline, etc.). Regarding the GNP, the central proposal was to construct a hiking teaching trail inside the national park Galicica. It was suggested that promoting the possibilities of hiking in autumn would prolong the tourism season. Also, teaching school classes on the trail would help increase public awareness.

Following the suggestion of the Feasibility Study, the authorities of the GNP prepared a project proposal to the Watershed Management Committee for Macedonia of the LOCP. The project was accepted for financing and was officially launched in September 2002 and successfully completed in October 2003. With the implementation of this project, one of the most attractive parts of the park is set for educational and recreational use. The trail is equipped with information boards and supported by media campaign and training of guides. It enables the park management to organize student excursions, recreational mount bike contests, recreational mountaineering etc.

The starting point of the trail is at 1.500m a.s.l. and can be reached through an asphalt road. From there the trail is going slightly downhill through the karstic valley Suvo Pole, then across the karstic valley Asan Gura. Both valleys are covered by dense meadows comprising a tremendous amount of plant species, including relicts, such as *Stipa mayeri* and the relict mountain tea (*Sideritis rezeri*). This part of the trail is 4,6km long and leads to the mountain house of the national park. The mountain house will offer the visitors a place to rest, refresh, dine or overnight for several days. From the mountain house, the trail splits into two separate trails. The Goga Peak Trail has educational and recreational character. The trail leads to the peak Goga (1735m) that has central position in the park, and is one of the best viewpoints even though it is not the highest. The second branch, the Samatska Dupka Cave Trail is 4km long, relative height difference of 150m and the total time needed is 2 hours. From the start the trail goes across the karstic field Asan Gura and then to Samatska Dupka cave. Created by an underground river, the cave is 224m long, 6m wide and

between 2 and 6m high. The cave is lit and has a configuration that allows safe and comfortable exploration by the visitors. The entrance to the cave is closed with a gate and visits are possible with a guide from, or authorized by the park only.

In parallel to this project, the authorities of the park have implemented several smaller compatible projects in co-operation with the local NGOs. The most ambitious is the ongoing project “*Establishing Financial Mechanisms for Conserving Biodiversity in the Balkan Region: Sustainable development through eco tourism and environmental education in protected areas*”. In Macedonia the project is implemented by the *Alliance for Lake Cooperation in Ohrid and Prespa* (ALLCOOP), in partnership with six non-governmental organizations from Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia and Montenegro (Serbia). The project is financed by a grant of GTZ through the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC). The overall objective of the project is to contribute to sustainable development of communities living in the vicinity of protected areas and the sustainability of parks, future Natura 2000 sites, in the Balkan region. The approach is to develop mechanism for sustainable public awareness raising activities on biodiversity and protected areas through incorporating environmental education (EE) in marketable ecotourism products for protected areas.

In the frame of this project, the project team at ALLCOOP, in cooperation with the GNP authorities and networking with other project partners developed a marketable environmental education program: Discover Galicica National Park. The product is deliverable either as a part of a wider ecotourist packages expected to be developed by the authorities of the GNP in the near future, or as an independent ecotourist product delivered by ALLCOOP in cooperation with the GNP, teachers from the region and partners from the business sector.

The program offers a study tour to the central plateau of the Galicica Mounting massif, along the recreational-educational trail of the GNP. The program will be delivered by trained and certified guides knowledgeable of the natural and cultural values of the Galicica Mountain and the places along the trails. The program is suitable for schoolchildren from the age of 9 to 12 forming a group of 14. When purchasing the product, the customers will be able to choose between the two optional trails: the Goga Peak hiking trail and the Samatska Dupka Cave hiking trail. The program includes comfortable transportation to the site and back from the city of Ohrid, Struga and Resen, in Macedonia or the city of Pogradec and the Visiting Center of the Prespa National Park (in Mala Gorica) in Albania. Currently, this product is the only example of its kind and available through the GNP, some of the local travel agents and through Internet. However, the official promotion and media campaign was delayed and is scheduled for the next season (2005).

A number of projects in areas related to ecotourism are being implemented currently and are congruent with

the above mentioned. First of all is the project for promotion of tourism in the region of Lake Ohrid and the Prespa Lakes, financed by GTZ and implemented by a team of experts in the region from Albania, Greece and Macedonia. The brochure produced in the frame of this project puts strong emphasis on cultural heritage and rural tourism. Closely related to this is another project financed by GTZ aiming at preparation of an inventory of the cultural heritage in the wide region (including the Korca region in Albania) and its presentation to tourists. Both give special emphasis to the GNP and its cultural, but also the natural values.

Several international foundations, including GTZ, the Swedish NRF, and the Swiss State Secretariat For Economic Affairs, are fostering rural tourism through different measures, such as the reconstruction of traditional households in villages the Prespa, organizing marketing campaigns and the like.

The project "*Grafting Our Future Onto The Old Roots: Community-based in-situ conservation of traditional fruit tree varieties and the associated traditional agricultural landscape in the Region of Ohrid and the Prespa Lakes (Albania, Greece, and Macedonia)*", addresses another area of relevance for ecotourism development in the region. The project focuses on conservation of biodiversity at landscape level. More specifically, this projects aims at conservation of traditional agricultural landscape in mountainous areas in the region through restoration of old and establishment of new orchards of traditional fruit tree varieties. Some of the pilot villages fall within the boundaries of the GNP, but also the Prespa National Park in Albania. The project is financed by GTZ small grants program that is administered through the Co-ordination Committee of the transboundary Prespa Park (Albania, Greece, and Macedonia).

Several regional workshops have also addressed the development of ecotourism in the wide region. The most important was organized by GTZ in May 2002, in Korca, Albania, in support of the transboundary Prespa. The primary focus of the meeting was eco-agro tourism; the workshop was attended by a representative of Schulz Aktiv Reisen.

4 THE OBSTACLES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Economic activities based on the park's natural resources include forestry (firewood production only), tourism, livestock breeding (e.g. some 2000 sheep) and gathering of medicinal plants and plant products. Despite the existence of various economic activities relaying on park's natural resources, forestry is the sole source of income for the park authorities. This is regardless of the fact that some of the most popular tourist facilities in the Ohrid area lay within the park boundaries and that, though there are no official data, the number of visitors is probably very high. However, the park authorities neither have any effective control over those activities nor may

generate revenues (e.g. from taxes, renting land or facilities). Although the recent emphasis on ecotourism creates some sense of optimism for the future, some critical issues remain yet unresolved. Firstly, at national level there is a lack of legal and financial means that would create enabling environment for a transition towards sustainable management of national parks, including the GNP. On the part of the GNP authorities, the obstacles is the absence of appropriate management plan or any comprehensive feasibility study, defining a strategy, indicators for sustainable use of natural resources in the GNP and the like. The way to resolve this issue is marked by the revision of the current Law on national parks in Macedonia in the frame of a project financed by the European Commission aiming to integrate the standards of the environmental *aquis* of the European Union in the national laws.

Encouraged by the promises of ecotourism, recently the park authorities have been engaged in a number of environmental education activities that can be labeled as 'Galicica National Park as a classroom' - mostly one day-excursions regularly organized for the schools. Despite of the campaigning and improved organization, the response from the schools was rather limited. In the view of the authorities the main reason for the limited interest was the poor economic situation in Macedonia. However, the other niches of the national and international market have not been seriously explored and attempted. The first commercial visit of foreign eco-tourist was organized quite recently and it is still too early to draw conclusions. Nevertheless, the authors of this article believe that it would be more than necessary to subsidize ecotourism activities of the park over an extended period (at least throughout 2004) before a sufficient level of experience and customers' confidence is build and marketable ecotourism products are established on the market.

In conclusion, there are a number of obstacles to development of ecotourism in the GNP that in turn limits the possibilities for developing marketable EEPs. Some of these obstacles operate at higher levels (national laws, poor economic performance of the country and region as a whole, low influx of foreign tourists due to the decade-long conflicts and political instability in the region, etc.). Some of them originate directly from the established management practices in the GNP that resist the deep paradigmatic shift in understanding the nature conservation and the notion of sustainable development. On the other hand, the very concept of ecotourism is relatively recent and there are still serious differences among the practitioners and academics over the basic concepts of ecotourism. In Macedonia this is exacerbated by the absence of national strategy for tourism development in general and for ecotourism in particular, as well as by the inexistence of management plan for the GNP.