



REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER

TRANS-BOUNDARY COOPERATION

through the management of shared natural resources

Experience and lessons from six years of work in three pilot areas – the Neretva Delta, Skadar/Shkodra Lake and West Stara Planina

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This document presents the lessons and experiences gained through the implementation of the project “Trans-boundary cooperation through the management of shared natural resources”, carried out by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) within the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme for South Eastern Europe (REReP) in the period 2000-2006.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether one considers the global or the very local scale, finding a balance between development and conservation of natural resources is perhaps the central dilemma of today's human communities. When communities directly depend on natural systems that are shared by two or more countries the issue becomes even more complicated, and cooperation among different sides of the border becomes an additional factor of key importance. On the other hand cooperation on the topic of natural resources' use - one that is rather neutral still essential for all - can bring local communities together, increase internal coherence and actually lead to the formation of new trans-boundary communities.

Trans-boundary regions of the Neretva Delta (between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia), Skadar/Shkodra Lake (between Montenegro and Albania) and West Stara Planina (i.e. Western Balkan Mountains; between Serbia and Bulgaria) bring very good examples to the above statements. They have been the target to a six years long international effort of the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) that sought to enhance cooperation among local communities - as well as the countries of South Eastern Europe, where these are located - through promoting the joint management and protection of trans-boundary natural resources.

The project has been launched in June 2000, under the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme (REReP) for South Eastern Europe and with the generous financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Now, at the beginning of 2007 its third phase comes to completion, leaving the place for a final project phase that explicitly focuses on ensuring the sustainability of key project results - namely, the trans-boundary cooperation mechanisms established through the work until now.

The present document intends to organize the experience gained through the project and provide a synthesis of main conclusions and lessons. Its ultimate goals are to help others to capitalize on these lessons and provide a strong basis for further interventions in the three pilot cross-border sites, or others facing similar development situations. Organisations - whether international, national or local - implementing or supporting similar projects may find the findings presented here especially useful in designing or carrying out their trans-boundary initiatives.

The content of the document is organised in five main parts. In each part answers are provided to one basic question that someone interested may logically ask. The first part answers to the question "where", and provides an insight into the local and regional context of work. The second part explains the project in terms of its concrete activities, their key outputs and main players that took part. The main section of the document is part three and four, which gives an overview of the methodologies used, important outcomes of the project and a synthesis of key lessons. The last part is dedicated to follow-up steps and provides information on the main directions of future actions. The main text of the document has a more general character, while concrete examples and different aspects of the work are explained in boxes.

PART I – LOCAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

WHERE IT HAPPENED?

PROJECT SITES

The three trans-boundary sites targeted by the project are all defined by large trans-boundary ecosystems – a delta, a mountain and a lake – which host unique natural and landscape values. Their rich biodiversity is recognised on both the national and international level. It is a clear evidence of their high conservation value that two of them – the Neretva Delta and Skadar/Shkodra Lake – are designated as wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar convention, while parts of West Stara Planina are registered as Biosphere Reserves under the Man and Biosphere programme of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

These areas do not only serve as critical habitats for a wide range of species. They also have a considerable socio-economic importance, as they directly support the livelihoods of a number of local communities, which partially live by directly utilising natural resources through agriculture, fishing, tourism, hunting or others.

The joint management of shared natural resources faces significant challenges in each of the three cross-border sites. Natural ecosystems do not recognize national borders. In the same time in case of cross-border sites within this project joint efforts towards the management of these ecosystems are hindered by specific problems in the relationship of the countries involved.

Albania and Montenegro have been isolated for decades. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia were part of the same country in the past, while recent military conflicts made their cooperation difficult. The current Republic of Serbia – part of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia and later, till 2006, of the state union of Serbia and Montenegro – was excluded for years from main environmental developments in Europe, while Bulgaria was intensively preparing for joining the European Union and has already become an EU member state since January 2007.

The general weakness of nature conservation efforts – caused by the lack of human and financial resources, low interest and awareness of stakeholders and the lack of information on the status and threats to biodiversity – just added to this. Local communities were also isolated from national level process in the field of environment and nature protection, and international cooperation was completely missing. However, threats to biodiversity increased as a result of over-exploitation and human pressures on natural resources by local rural communities, the lack of coordination among management agencies, weak legislation and enforcement, the lack of integration of conservation concerns into development planning, and the lack of joint monitoring efforts.

All these created a very harsh and difficult working environment for the project, which started immediately after the end of military conflicts in the region. Convincing central and local administrations (e.g. the federation government of Bosnia-Herzegovina and cantonal administrations) or two countries sharing a common border to work together proved to be a major difficulty. Most national administrations have been isolated for years also from the international community. They had very limited capacity, no

knowledge and experience on implementing international projects and no information on the state of the environment. Besides, cross-border sites targeted by the project are marginal areas, remote from the capitals and even the physical access to them was problematic.

Over the years the situation has improved. Dialogue and cooperation has been established, local municipalities started to understand the importance of the sustainable use of shared natural resources and a common vision for their protection and management was developed. Local stakeholders acquired new skills and knowledge, and trans-boundary stakeholder networks established through the project became operational.

Since the launch of the project in 2000 all countries involved made significant progress both in general terms of economic development and stabilisation and in the management and protection of the environment. In June 2004 Croatia became an EU candidate country, with its Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) entering into force in February 2005. Albania signed its SAA in June 2006 while negotiations with Bosnia-Herzegovina are in progress. Negotiations with Montenegro resumed following its independence, while with Serbia they are expected to resume as soon as full cooperation with the United Nations' International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is achieved.

Still, in the context of the three project sites finding sustainable solutions that build on local values without degrading them, has been a major challenge, and it is still. The project intended to address this situation and supported local communities in identifying such solutions, while building lasting trans-boundary cooperation and dialogue.

The Neretva River Delta

BASIC FACTS	
<u>Location:</u>	Lower Neretva Valley, incl. the river catchment from Počitelj and to the river mouth
<u>The region:</u>	
Total area	app. 20,000 ha
Population:	app. 60,000 inhabitants
Largest settlements:	Čapljina (Bosnia-Herzegovina, 19,900 inhab.); Metković (Croatia, 13,500 inhab.)
Climate:	Mediterranean climate, with highest amounts of precipitation in winter
<u>Neretva River</u>	
Catchment size:	10,110 km ²
Total length:	225 km (203 km in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 22 km in Croatia)
<u>Natural values:</u>	
Main biotopes:	Open waters with Myriophylleto-Nupharetum, Ranunculeto-Callitrichetum vernae communities, reedbeds, carex-meadows, wet meadows, willow bushes and forests, forests of Quercus pubescens and Carpinus orientalis, degraded sub-mediterranean forests, rocky areas with poor vegetation, cliffs and regulated wetlands for agriculture.
Species diversity:	34 freshwater and >100 marine fish, 7 amphibians, 16 reptiles, >300 birds (115 nesting), 52 mammals.
Important species:	Pygmy cormorant (Phalacrocorax pygmaeus), ferruginous duck (Aythya nyroca), bearded parrotbill (Panurus biarmicus), Great bittern (Botaurus stellaris), Kentish plover (Charadrius alexandrinus).
Area under protection:	9,031 ha (7,411 ha in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1,620 ha in Croatia)
Ramsar areas:	18,911 ha (7,411 ha in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 11,500 ha in Croatia)

The Neretva Delta region is a predominantly rural area of approximately 20,000 hectares, shared by Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The region supports the livelihoods of approximately 60,000 people living in nine municipalities – seven on the Croatian side and two in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ecologic characteristics of the region are defined by the 225 km long Neretva River, which on its last 30 kilometres long section – just before flowing into the Adriatic Sea – spreads into an alluvial delta. The upper part of the river, flowing through Bosnia and Herzegovina, has a strong mountainous character and in the times of high waters it brings large quantities of dissolved nutrients and organic substrates, the sedimentation of which creates the very fertile soil of the lower Neretva Valley. Downstream of the mouths of its tributaries, Trebizat and Bregava the river makes one natural entity with the valley. Its app. 8,000 hectares large upper part, with several lakes and large marshes, called “Hutovo Blato” is located in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the app. 12,000 hectares large lower section, defined by several regulated branches of the river, lies in Croatia.

The lower, Croatian part of the delta has been significantly altered, mainly by land reclamation works completed in the 1960`s. From its twelve branches, today only three exist, and associated marshes and small lakes have also disappeared. Only a few fragments of formerly large Mediterranean wetlands have been left behind, which are isolated by the “matrix” of cultivated land. Although today Hutovo Blato is in a more natural status and better protected, it also suffered from human impacts in the past. In 1979 a large section of the marsh-lake complex, the so called “Svitavsko Blato” has been transformed into the 1,300 ha large storage lake of the hydro-electric power plant built at Capljina. Large segments of marsh vegetation have been destroyed – wet meadows and floodplain poplar forests –, which resulted in a considerable reduction in bird and fish species.

Still, Neretva Delta provides habitat for a diverse collection of plants and animals, which is recognised by official nature conservation on both the national and international level. There are 34 species of freshwater fish (three of them endemic), more than 100 species of marine fish, 7 amphibians, 16 reptiles and 52 mammals. There are more than 300 bird species, of which 115 regularly nest in the area. When compared to other European wetlands of international importance, Neretva Delta proves to be richer in the overall number of species, but somewhat poorer in the number of nesting waterfowl species. The area is also important as a European resting place for migratory birds, and as a wintering ground for some species.

Approximately 45 percent of the area (9,031 ha in the two countries) is officially protected by national nature conservation regulations, and almost the whole area (11,500 ha in Croatia and 7,411 ha in Bosnia and Herzegovina) is recognised as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar convention. According to the Physical Planning Strategy of the Republic of Croatia and its National Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy and Action Plan, the entire Neretva Delta is anticipated for protection as a nature park. In Bosnia and Herzegovina Hutovo Blato is included in the national system of protected areas as a Nature Park since 1995.

Having a long history that goes back as far as the Iron Age, and since then receiving impacts from a variety of cultures – Illyrians, Greeks, Romans, Bogumils, and Venetians – Neretva Delta also has a significantly rich archaeological heritage. This includes remnants of prehistoric fortifications and settlements, monuments from roman times (villas, mosaics, epitaphs, etc.), remnants of medieval fortresses from the times of the Turkish occupation, and others.

Favourable natural conditions of the area are not only beneficial for preserving sites of unique natural value, but it also directly supports the living of its human population. Agriculture, hunting and fishing are traditional activities in the area, and due to the lack of other sources of income and recently increased unemployment, they gain more and more interest. As by now 40-50 % of households own land, farming – especially the production of citrus fruits and vegetables in lower parts and olives at higher elevations – became the most widespread economic activity. This is also due to the high productivity of land and the very favourable climate conditions, which for some crops allow for several harvests in one season. The Neretva Delta region has a great and still unexplored potential for tourism development. It is rich in natural, cultural and archaeological values, and major tourism attractions – the historical city of Dubrovnik, Croatia, the Dalmatian coast or the spiritual site of Medjugorje, in Bosnia and Herzegovina – are very close. Although today tourism has a relatively little share in the

local economy, the development and proper marketing of new alternative tourism products could result in a significant contribution of the sector, and bring additional income sources for the local population.

Besides features of local economic importance, the region also serves as an important crossing area for major existing and planned transportation corridors. Traffic along the Dalmatian coast crosses the lower parts of the region, while transport corridors along the valley have an important role in linking Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Adriatic Sea and the Port of Ploče. The Adriatic-Ionian motorway and the highway between Ploče and Budapest are just in plans, however once implemented they will have a major impact on the area in both economic and ecologic terms.

Like in many other similar regions – the coexistence of important natural and cultural values and the various human uses that often cause damage to these and drive towards their depletion, make the strive towards sustainable development in this region particularly difficult.

CURRENT OUTSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:

- The water regime of the river is disturbed by six hydro-power plants and associated water reservoirs located along the upper sections. Sedimentation and productivity of the river is decreased, the erosion of the river bed is stronger, water level changes frequently and rapidly and there are often water shortages in the summer;
- Uncontrolled exploitation of sand and gravel;
- The lack of communal sewage systems in most of the towns and villages;
- Illegal waste disposal on the river banks;
- Land use changes and habitat loss due to the expansion of human settlements, amelioration of the terrain to gain agricultural land, and the development of large transport infrastructure;
- Reliance of the local population on primary activities such as hunting and fishing, which often results the overuse of resources (the lack of sufficient alternatives for local economic development makes these sources of living more and more important and unavoidable);
- The use of pesticides and artificial fertilisers by intensive agriculture, widespread especially in the lower, Croatian parts of the delta. (Quantities used are relatively low, but the area is extremely sensitive due to the widespread network of channels running in the immediate surroundings of agricultural plots, without any buffer strips between watercourses and agricultural land, and the porous limestone bedrock of the whole region);
- Generally low environmental awareness of the local population;
- The lack of appropriate nature and environmental protection and monitoring measures; weak or almost non-existent law enforcement concerning the use of natural resources.

Skadar/Shkodra Lake

BASIC FACTS	
<u>Location:</u>	In the Zeta-Skadar Valley, between Montenegro and Albania
<u>The region:</u>	
Area:	...
Population:	App. 350,000 (150,000 in Albania, 200,000 in Rep. of Montenegro)
Largest settlements:	Shkodra (Albania, 125,000 inhabitants); Podgorica (Rep. of Montenegro, 180,000 inhabitants)
Climate:	Mediterranean (mild & rainy winters, hot summers, max. precipitation 840 mm in Nov.-Dec)
<u>Skadar/Shkodra Lake</u>	
Origin:	Tectonic
Catchment size:	5500 km ² (20% in Albania, 80% in Montenegro)
Total surface:	395 – 530 km ²
Volume:	App. 2.6 billion m ³
Depth:	5-9 m (mean); 60 m maximum
Main affluent:	Morača River (99 km long, 200 m ³ /s)
<u>Natural values:</u>	
Main biotopes:	Open waters, rooted floating Euhydrophyte vegetation, reed beds, periodically flooded sedge (<i>Cerex elata</i>) meadows, poplar-willow woodlands, floodplain forests with Skadar Oak (<i>Quercus robur scutarensis</i>) and Caucasian Ash (<i>Fraxinus oxycarpa</i>), sub-mediterranean shrub vegetation on rocky surfaces with <i>Carpinus orientalis</i> , <i>Punica granatum</i> , <i>Paliurus spina-christi</i> , <i>Ficus carica</i> , etc.
Species diversity:	726 vascular plants, 56 fish (in the whole water system of the lake; 15 endemic), 15 amphibians, 30 reptiles, 271 birds, 57 mammals
Important species:	Common sturgeon (<i>Acipenser sturio</i>), Dalmatian pelican (<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>), Pigmy cormorant (<i>Phalacrocorax pygmaeus</i>), Spoonbill (<i>Platalea leucordia</i>); Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)
Area under protection:	63,027 ha (40,000 in Montenegro, 23,027 ha in Albania)
Ramsar areas:	63,027 ha (40,000 in Montenegro, 23,027 ha in Albania)

The cross-border site of Skadar/Shkodra Lake lies within its 5,500 km² large trans-boundary basin, shared by Albania (20%) and the Republic of Montenegro (80%). The area targeted by the project is the home to some 350,000 people, living in five municipalities – the municipalities of Shkodra and Malësia e Madhe in Albania and Podgorica, Cetinje and Bar in the Republic of Montenegro.

The lake, considered the largest of its nature on the Balkan Peninsula, is located in the utmost south of the Republic of Montenegro, in the Skadar-Zeta Valley and in the karstic terrain of the south-eastern Dinaric Alps in Albania. The lake has a tectonic origin: it used to be a bay of the Adriatic Sea (just like today's Kotor Bay), separated

from sea as a result of tectonic movements in the Pliocene period. Its surface varies between 540 km² in winter and 370 km² in the summer, and its shoreline is 168 km long, with a 110.5 km long section lying on the territory of Montenegro and 57.5 km within the jurisdiction of Albania. Skadar/Shkodra Lake has an open drainage basin, receiving most of its waters through the 99 kilometres long Morača River and emptying in the Adriatic Sea through the 44 kilometres long Buna/Bojana River (outflow: 320 m³/s). Waters of the lake are considered mesotrophic with tendencies towards eutrophic during the summer. The southern coast of the lake, defined by the ridges of the Mountains of Lovćen, Sutorman, Rumija and Taraboš, is steep and rugged, while the northern and eastern shores, lying in the Zeta Valley and the Shkoder lowland, are flat, gradually descending towards the lake's bottom.

As a natural lake, with mostly unregulated water levels and natural shores Skadar/Shkodra Lake hosts a very diverse set of different habitats with unique biodiversity, which is recognised at both national and international levels. Open water surfaces with floating algae communities are surrounded by large wetlands with rooted and floating Euhydrophytic vegetation of white water lily (*Nymphaea alba*), yellow pond lily (*Nuphar luteum*) and water-chestnut (*Trapa natans*). Reed beds, flood forests with poplar and willow species, and periodically flooded tufted sedge (*Carex elata*) vegetation are also common in the area. Driest parts of wetlands are overgrown with Skadar oak (*Quercus robur scutarenensis*) and Caucasian ash (*Fraxinus oxycarpa*) forests, while the dry slopes of surrounding mountains are covered by sub-mediterranean pseudo-maquis vegetation with *Carpinus orientalis*, *Punica granatum*, *Paliurus spina-christi*, *Ficus carica*, and others.

This large variety of habitats supports a rich assemblage of species: 726 vascular plants, with more than 30 rare species, more than 50 fish species (15 of them endemic to the water system), 15 amphibians, 30 reptiles, 271 bird species (90% of them migratory species of international conservation concern), and 57 mammals.

Corresponding to its natural richness, by today most of the lake and adjacent wetland areas are under official nature conservation and are also recognised as wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar convention. In 1983 a National Park has been established on the Montenegrin side of the lake, on an area of 40,000 hectares, while the Albanian side – some 23,027 hectares – received the status of managed nature reserve in November 2005. The Ramsar diploma has been awarded to the lake in December 1995 for its Montenegrin side and in February 2006 for the newly established Albanian protected area.

The Skadar/Shkodra Lake region is not only rich in natural values, but it also has a very long history with a lot of remnants visible even today. There are more than 20 old monasteries and archaeological sites on the Montenegrin side, while on the Albanian side Shkodra castle named “Rozafa”, with its more than 2500 years of history is the most significant historical value.

Agriculture, fishing and tourism are the most relevant economic activities of the population around the lake. Fishing is naturally among the most traditional sources of living, fish stocks being exploited even today at a considerable level. The catch is composed mostly of common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), bleak (*Alburnus alburnus alborella*), perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) and eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) and shows a downward tendency due to overexploitation. According to past data, annual fish catch reached more than 700-1000 tones per year. In the lake basin both intensive and extensive forms of farming

occur, however small scale subsistence production of vegetables and dairy products is more widespread. Products like the famous “Vranac” grapes, Shkodra tobacco, “Zeta” white corn or white goat cheese are very typical to the region and have both an economic and cultural value. Although not so widespread, the processing of reed, willow and other plants into baskets, boxes and other handcraft products is another traditional activity. Due to its richness in (often unexplored) tourism attractions – i.e. nature and landscape values, historical monuments and traditional crafts/products – the lake region has a great potential for tourism development. Different forms of tourism, such as cruising, fishing and recreational tourism, eco/nature tourism, and others, are receiving more and more attention as a real opportunity for developing alternative income sources. However, capacities to explore these opportunities are still relatively weak.

The Skadar/Shkodra Lake region has unique assets of significant conservation value, which also represent an important resource for the local population. The need to treat these with special care is also underlined by the recent enlargement of protected areas around the lake. However, this needs to be address also when development opportunities are being exploited for the benefits of the local population. There are several environmental problems, and pressures from human activities, which represent a threat to values of the region, and if not addressed well and in time, they could become real obstacles for the sustainable development of the area.

CURRENT OUTSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:

- Unsustainable use of the lake’s biodiversity:
 - Uncontrolled fishing, over-fishing, the use of illegal fishing methods (explosives, electricity etc.) and fishing during the spawning seasons, which endanger the viability of commercial fishing
 - The disturbance of migratory routes of species – sturgeon, sea perch, whitefish and eel
 - Deliberate or accidental introduction of alien species (gold fish, perch) that severely alters the composition and dynamics of fish communities
 - Disturbance to nesting grounds and bird colonies by fishermen, tourists, local harvesters of branches of willow and laurel trees, reed, and others, which resulted in disappearance of species like herons (*Ardea cinerea*, *Ardeola ralloides*), egrets (*Egretta garzetta*) and cormorants (*Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, *P. carbo*) from many of their traditional nesting places.
 - Gathering certain amphibian and reptile species – e.g. frogs, Greek turtles (*Testudo hermannii*) – for human consumption, or for selling to collectors of exotic species
- Destruction of habitats and disturbance to natural sites:
 - Conversion of natural biotopes into agricultural land
 - Increased load of agrichemicals reaching the lake
 - Deforestation of extended parts of the lake’s drainage basin (e.g. in the Upper Shkodra Valley) during the last decades, causing the increased inflow of silt and organic matter, which speeds up natural succession processes
 - Transport on road and railways along some sections of the lakeshore and shipping on the lake
 - Construction and the expansion of settlements (e.g. the city of Shkodra)

- Sand and gravel excavation from the Morača river, peat exploitation – still quite limited or just in plans, however if done at a larger scale could seriously damage the whole ecosystem.
- Risks of water pollution from industrial sources (especially in Montenegro), households around the lake and agricultural areas:
 - Lack of pollution prevention measures (water treatment facilities, dumpsites) accompanying urban and industrial growth of the last five decades,
 - Increased load of nutrients (phosphorus and nitrogen) from untreated wastewater and agricultural fertilizers
- Low awareness of the population on local environmental problems and risks;
- Lack of research and sound data – esp. concerning trends in water quality, abundance of species and degradation of habitats – that hinders the design of appropriate and efficient management and protection measures.

West Stara Planina

BASIC FACTS	
<u>Location:</u>	North-East Serbia & North-West Bulgaria
<u>The region:</u>	
Area:	4035 km ²
Population:	>200,000 (app. 40,000 in Bulgaria and 177,000 in Serbia)
Largest settlements:	Pirot, Dimitrovgrad, Zajechar, Knjazevac (Serbia), Berkovitza, Chiprovtsi, Godech, Belogradchik (Bulgaria)
Climate:	Temperate continental with a strong mountainous character
<u>West Stara Planina</u>	
Highest altitude:	2169 (peak "Midjur")
Average altitude:	658 m
<u>Natural values:</u>	
Main biotopes:	Beech (<i>Fagus sylvatica</i>), fir (<i>Abies alba</i>) and spruce (<i>Picea abies</i>) forests; high stem forests of durmast oak (<i>Quercus daleschampii</i>) hornbeam (<i>Carpinus betulus</i>) and Hungarian oak (<i>Quercus frainetto</i>); andropogonid and savory pseudo-steppes; meadow-steppe communities of scented grass (<i>Chrysopogon gryllus</i>); high mountain meadows; communities of <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> and <i>V. vitis-idaea</i> ; communities of bear berry (<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i>), spike heath (<i>Bruckenthalia spiculifolia</i>), dwarf-pine (<i>Pinus mugo</i>), and juniper (<i>Juniperus sibirica</i>), calcareous rocks with <i>Ramonda serbica</i> , caves and ravines, cotton grass bogs, peat bogs and mires with sedge species (<i>Carex nigra</i> , <i>C. acuta</i> , <i>C. echinata</i> , etc.).
Species diversity:	>4300 species (210 priority sp); 1658 vascular plants, 1937 invertebrates, 29 fish, 27 amphibians & reptiles, 137 breeding birds, 61 mammals
Important species:	<i>Ramonda serbica</i> ; <i>Cottus gobio haemusi</i> ; <i>Triturus cristatus</i> ; <i>T. alpestris</i> ; <i>Eremophila alpestris balcanica</i> ; <i>Prunella collaris subalpinus</i> ; <i>Aquila heliaca</i> ; <i>Crex crex</i> ; <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> ; <i>Bonasa bonasia</i> ; <i>Rhinolophus</i> sp.; <i>Myotis</i> sp; <i>Miniopterus schreibersii</i> ; <i>M. brandtii</i> ; <i>Plecotus auritus</i> ; <i>Lynx lynx</i> ; <i>Canis lupus</i> ; <i>Lutra lutra</i>
Area under protection:	Nature park "Stara Planina" on the Serbian side - 142,000 ha. 17 small protected areas in Bulgaria, procedure for Nature park "West Balkan"- 162,000 ha
Biosphere reserves:	Biosphere reserve "Chuprene"

The predominantly mountainous trans-boundary region of West Stara Planina is located on the borders of Bulgaria and the Republic of Serbia, and extends on an area of more than 4000 km² - 1944 km² in Serbia and 2099 km² in Bulgaria. The project area is located within the administrative boundaries of eight municipalities, four in Serbia (Dimitrovgrad, Pirot, Zajechar and Knjazevac) and four in Bulgaria (Belogradchik, Berkovitza, Chiprovtsi and Chuprene), and it has a total population of more than 200,000 inhabitants.

Ecological characteristics of the area are very much defined by the most western section of the Balkan mountain range – Stara Planina – which crosses the region from south-east to north-west. West Stara Planina represents a much dissected section of the Balkan Mountains, with many peaks and valleys, reaching an altitude of 2169 m above sea level at its highest peak, Midjur. Its average elevation within the project area is 658 m, and national borders run almost along its crest. The project area is located within the temperate continental climatic zone however local climate is much influenced by local geographic conditions, altitude being the most important factor. At the feet of the mountain and at lower elevations climate is somewhat warmer with average January temperatures of app. -2 to -3°C and average July temperatures of 20-21°C. At higher elevations (1000-2000 m and above) winters are cold (mean temperature in January is -4°C to -9°C), snow cover lasts for 100-200 days, while summers are also significantly cooler (July mean temperature of 8-16°C). The average precipitation in the region is about 850-900 mm reaching however values of 1000-1200 mm at altitudes over 1000 metres.

The whole project area is located within the Danube River basin, and has a dense river network which defines 21 catchments on the Serbian territory and 8 sub-basins on the Bulgarian side. The main river of the region, Nishava, has a trans-boundary basin with three rivers crossing the border: Nishava, Visochitza and Staninska River.

Most of the project area is covered by forests, meadows and pastures, which represent an important resource for forestry and agriculture, and host a rich biodiversity with species and habitats of high conservation value. In total 91 natural habitat types have been described in the area, out of which 59 are of high conservation value according to the EU Habitats Directive and the Bern Convention. Further six habitats are considered of national importance. Autochthonous forest habitats, with their overall coverage of approximately 120,000 ha represent the greatest value, beech forests (app. 42,000 ha), forests of fir (*Abies alba*) and of spruce (*Picea abies*), and mixed forests of durmast oak (*Quercus daleschampii*), hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) and Hungarian oak (*Quercus frainetto*) being the most important ones. Grassland habitats – such as extended pseudo-steppe and meadow-steppe communities, high mountain meadows and pastures – often mixed with communities of *Vaccinium myrtillus* and *V. vitis-idaea*, bear berry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), spike heath (*Bruckenthalia spiculifolia*), dwarf-pine (*Pinus mugo*), and Siberian juniper (*Juniperus sibirica*) – are the other main group of important natural habitats. Although much less widespread, calcareous rocks overgrown with *Ramonda Serbica*, an endemic species of the area are among the most typical habitat types of the region. Other less abundant still important biotopes include those formed along rivers and streams – like mountain cotton grass bogs, peat bogs and mires with sedge species – as well as caves and ravines (more than 90!), which are of key importance for the persistence of bat populations and some invertebrate species.

This great diversity of different habitats results in a similarly rich species diversity. The area of West Stara Planina host more than 4300 species, including 1658 vascular plants (with 178 endemic species), 1937 invertebrates (with 90 endemics), 29 fish (with 1 endemic species), 11 amphibians, 16 reptiles, 198 birds (137 regularly breed in the area), 21 bats, as well as 23 small and 17 large mammals. 210 of all species recorded have been identified as of high priority for nature conservation, and due to the outstandingly high number of endemic species the area is considered as one of the biodiversity hot-spots of Europe.

The high conservation value of West Stara Planina is also recognized through various government initiatives targeting the official conservation of different parts of the area. In 1995 the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of Environment of Bulgaria, together with relevant scientific institutions, local governments and NGO representatives adopted a declaration on the establishment of cross-border protected area, the “Stara Planina Peace Park”. In early 2003, the REC submitted a proposal for the designation of a nature park on the Bulgarian side, which has been approved by the Ministry of Environment and Waters (MoEW). The proposal suggested the designation of an area of some 160,000 hectares, based on results of a detailed assessment of the regions` biodiversity. In 2006, through the financial support of the ministry and SDC, the full documentation for the nature park was developed and public hearings were successfully carried out. Currently on the Serbian side of the border the whole territory of the mountain is protected as a nature park, while in Bulgaria 17 protected areas of national or international importance have been declared (e.g. “Chuprene” Biosphere Reserve, “Belogradchishki Skali” Nature Monument, “Kopren-Tri Chuki” Protected Area, “Gornata Koriya” Strict Nature Reserve, and others). In the framework of the CORINE Biotope project, a 47,000 hectares large site has been identified in Bulgaria as of high conservation value at the European level. Almost the entire territory of the proposed Nature Park on the Bulgarian side has been proposed for inclusion in the Natura 2000 network, the ecological network of the European Union.

In spite of its natural richness the predominantly rural area of West Stara Planina suffers from several obstacles that hinder its social and economic development, the socio-demographic structure of the population being among the most important ones. According to a survey carried out based on a representative group of the population, the average age of the local population in rural parts of the region is about 60-65 in Serbia and 50-55 in Bulgaria and the majority has no higher education. Members of younger generations migrate to urban areas, and there is a general perception that the region is not attractive for living. The availability of infrastructure and public services is also low, and most households live from single income, very often only pension or social aid. Subsistence farming and the gathering of non-wood forest products is very often the main source of additional income, especially for families depending on state support. Due to the general mismatch between professional orientations - mainly industry - and available economic opportunities (e.g. agriculture, forestry, tourism), there is an increasing unemployment, which adds to the low attractiveness of the region for the young.

Most important economic sectors for the future development of the area are agriculture, forestry and tourism. More than half of the population owns land, and, although the average size of agricultural holdings is small (1.6-9 ha), rich traditions in extensive agricultural production (esp. milk products, wool and soft fruits) and the generally clean environment creates a good potential for the production of certified organic products with higher added value. The proximity of protected areas, attractive nature sites, cultural monuments and religious sites (monasteries, churches) and conserved traditional crafts (weaving of carpet icons, joinery, knitting, leather-works, etc.) represent an important resource for tourism development, which could bring additional income to families living in the area.

However, the exploitation of these potentials is still lagging behind as the innovative capacity of local communities is generally low, and the necessary financial, technical

and human infrastructure is also missing. Some widespread activities, such as the excessive collection of natural products, the deliberate killing of some animal species, or illegal waste disposal even endanger the basis for implementing such developments in the future.

The above negative socio-economic trends and the generally low environmental awareness of the local population deliver important threats to the rich biodiversity of the region, which undermines its future sustainable development.

CURRENT OUTSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:

- Abandonment of meadows and pastures, which leads to their overgrowth with shrub vegetation, and the disappearance of important species-rich semi-natural grassland communities;
- Excessive collection of non-wood forest products and natural products, such as mushroom, aromatic and medicinal plants and molluscs;
- Soil erosion due to weak forestry practices and the delayed (or missing) reforestation after clear-cut;
- Illegal waste disposal along and in rivers, delivering a negative impact on water quality and the quality of sediments;
- Deliberate and accidental introduction of exotic species in water systems (e.g. zebra mussels, introduced via fishing nets or restocking of fish populations, cause serious damage to water management infrastructure; rainbow trout introduced for commercial purposes eliminates populations of the indigenous trout species, *Salmo trutta fario* etc.);
- Deliberate killing of species, such as owls, bats, snakes, and several other predators, due to their negative image among the local population;
- The use of illegal methods in hunting and fishing; unsustainable catch;
- New plans of some municipalities (e.g. Berkovitz, Bulgaria and Knjazevac, Serbia) concerning the development of mass tourism facilities (i.e. large scale ski resorts).

THE FRAMEWORK: THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL RECONSTRUCTION PROGRAMME (REREP)¹

This project has been launched as one of the first “field-interventions” under the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme (REReP) for South Eastern Europe, immediately after its adoption. The programme – providing a regional political framework for many support initiatives – has been initiated in 1999 by the European Commission and the REC, following the Kosovo conflict.

Ministers of environment from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Romania, observed by representatives of donor countries, international and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), met in Skopje in March 2000 to discuss and agree upon REReP in the framework of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro (at that time part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) joined REReP in November 2000, after internal political changes.

The Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme is a participatory, flexible and transparent process to ensure that environmental protection is not overlooked in efforts towards the reconstruction and stabilisation of the region of South Eastern Europe. It started as a regional initiative, not just in recognition that environmental problems needed regional solutions, but as an early attempt to establish contacts and to build trust among environmental actors.

REREP OBJECTIVES:

- Creating functioning environmental institutions and developing a sound, effectively enforced environmental legal and policy framework that approximates with that of the EU;
- Strengthening civil society, in which the public has access to environmental information and participates in environmental decision making, and environmental awareness is enhanced;
- Achieving measurably reduced levels of environmental pollution, with the corresponding health benefits that follow;
- Minimising environmental pressures arising from economic recovery;
- Achieving genuine environmental regional cooperation on cross-border issues that meets the obligations of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

The REReP mechanism has been revised to align with the rapidly developing Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), and evolved into a mechanism to support countries in meeting their SAP obligation of regional cooperation. It has been a clear expectation that “REReP must develop into a vehicle to assist countries of SEE in their long-term goal of integration into the structures of the European Union.” Therefore the programme combined Stability Pact objectives aiming to foster lasting peace, prosperity and stability with objectives of the SAP to harmonise environmental policies, institutions and standards in countries of the region with those of the EU.

¹ Source: Yordanka Minkova, Environmental Reconstruction and EU Approximation in South Eastern Europe, REReP Highlights 2003-2005, The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, 2005

Country reports presented in September 2006 to the REReP Task Force indicated significant progress in the development of environmental legislation, national strategies and programmes. Environmental institutions and agencies have been strengthened, and their staffs have been trained. However, still nearly all SEE countries seem to have major limitations concerning their institutional capacity. National environmental ministries and agencies engage insufficient numbers of staff, people are overloaded and have to cover several environmental areas in parallel, and national budgets for environment are limited.

PART II – THE PROCESS AND MAIN PLAYERS

WHAT HAPPENED AND WHO TOOK PART?

GOAL:

To contribute to enhancing cooperation among South Eastern European countries through the management of shared natural resources.

Initial PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

1. Promotion of cooperation in the management and protection of key trans-boundary areas in South Eastern Europe, which represent sites of key nature conservation interest with a high potential for trans-boundary social interaction;
2. Promotion of local organisations and cross-border exchanges between local organisations and people in the interest of managing shared natural resources;
3. Promotion of technical networks at a regional level with a view to support the effective management of selected trans-boundary sites as well as the integration of these networks in relevant national and international level processes.

MAIN STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION

The project has been implemented through three main phases, the first one starting on the occasion of the signature of the first project contract on July 7, 2000, and finishing by the end of January, 2002. The second phase has been implemented between February 2002 and February 2004, while phase three started in March 2004 and finishes in December 2006.

In order to ensure the long-term sustainability of project results and the proper handover of the project and its achievements to local beneficiaries a fourth phase is about to be launched. This final phase is going to run until the end of 2008 with a more narrow focus on ensuring the long term sustainability of trans-boundary cooperation. More details concerning activities in phase four and beyond are presented later in this chapter and in Part V – Next Steps.

In terms of its content the implementation of the project followed as flexibly as possible the natural evolution of one step after the other. The first two phases had a more preparatory sense, with more common features in the three sites, while the longest third phase focused on the implementation of three site-specific agendas developed in a joint effort of the project team and local stakeholders. Although the three project sites were very different, possibilities for exchanging good practices and exploring synergies between the different actions have been utilised as much as possible.

The following part explains different stages of implementation following both their logical and chronological structure. Each stage represents a process on its own, and different stages – although closely linked to each other – never finished exactly where the next one started. This set-up created a lively project structure that required a flexible approach to management.

Initial preparations, project launch & setting the scene

As one of the very first preparatory steps a preliminary assessment of 25 potential cross-border sites all over South Eastern Europe has been carried out. A special set of selection criteria, defined by the REC and SDC has been used, including elements like the presence of significant conservation values, official nature conservation efforts and presence of nature conservation authorities, significance of natural resources, likelihood of active participation in cross-border exchanges, tradition or history of cross-border interactions, other international projects underway, safety, etc. As a result, initially two pilot sites have been selected – the Neretva River Delta, and Skadar/Shkodra Lake, and the third project site, West Stara Planina has been added in September 2001.

After the launch of the project efforts have been focused on establishing a functional project implementation structure and launching an extensive project planning process.

On the national level ministerial focal points have been nominated for the project at the Ministries of Environment of Albania, the Republic of Montenegro and Croatia, and at a later stage also at the Ministry of Environment and Waters in Bulgaria and the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Serbia. In the special case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the internal administrative structure is more complex, different focal points have been nominated on the federal level and at the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton.

To ensure a continuous local presence of the project six site offices have been established and made operational – two in each site and one on each side of the border. Local Site Coordinators have been recruited and trained, and internal reporting rules have been agreed. Since the very beginning of the project the work of Site Coordinators benefited from the presence and support of the well established network of REC Country Office, which in many cases already had direct experience in working in the sites targeted by the project.

Regular joint planning events for all the three sites have been organised during the first phase of the project. These moved a large number of local stakeholders and national level players, and delivered results such as an overall project logical framework to serve the planning of activities in all the three sites. On the local level the project has been launched through so called “Get Everyone Involved Meetings”. These were in fact local discussion platforms that have been organised in each site and on both sides of the border, and gathered over 150 representatives of different national and local level stakeholders. Representatives nominated through local meetings participated in regional project planning events, where the scope of work and planned activities have been revised and refined.

An intensive coordination concerning the planning of the project’s implementation between the REC and SDC has been maintained from the early beginnings. Regular planning events always involved representatives of SDC and delegated consultants. Annual monitoring and backstopping missions have been organized to each of the sites. In 2002 and 2003 evaluation missions have been also carried out, which gave new directions for developing strategies and action plans.

KEY OUTPUTS:

- Three pilot cross-border sites selected based on a thorough review of local specifics;
- Ministerial focal points are nominated and involved in project planning processes;
- Site offices with site Coordinators are fully operational;

- Local actors are involved through five local forums (“Get Everyone Involved Meetings”);
- Project action plan and log-frame is prepared through three regional planning meetings

Identifying issues and setting joint priorities

As one of the first actions on the site level an extensive process of gathering and analysing available data and information has been started, directly involving relevant local players and an as wide group of stakeholders as feasible. The process has been running from the beginning of phase one, continued through phase two, and provided the basis for many activities in the last phase of the project. Studies on local socio-economic conditions and joint surveys on different aspects of resource use have been carried out. The ground for preparing joint biodiversity databases has been set, and the first cross-border maps have been produced. Through these local stakeholders engaged in dealings with natural resources, community ownership increased, and discussions on trans-boundary management aspects started.

Surveys provided a direct input to facilitated discussions among local actors aiming to identify common priorities for cooperation. Several workshops were held, and stakeholders expressed their will to cooperate on issues such as water management, hydrological dynamics and biodiversity values, environmental threats and impacts of economic activities, education, etc.

Actions aiming to increase the environmental awareness of the local public and preparing the ground for communicating resource management issues to a wider group of actors have been implemented. The environmental awareness of key groups has been studied, steps for improving the situation have been defined, and communication campaigns have been carried out. In order to increase the environmental awareness of school children special school events have been organised. Site offices developed their own databases of relevant local actors, which have been used for disseminating information related to specific issues addressed and the project in general.

KEY OUTPUTS:

- Survey on existing water rights (Neretva Delta)
- Study on the relationships between hydrological dynamics, biodiversity values and the environmental impacts of economic activities (Neretva Delta)
- Socio-economic analysis (Neretva Delta, West Stara Planina)
- Survey on irrigation practices (Neretva Delta)
- Study on environmental risks and potentials for local development (Skadar/Shkodra Lake)
- Survey on the environmental awareness of key stakeholder groups (Neretva Delta)
- Quick analysis of heavy metals in samples of sediments and fish (Neretva Delta)
- Bibliography of recent studies on biodiversity and natural resources, and other relevant documents (Skadar/Shkodra Lake, West Stara Planina)
- Biodiversity database (Skadar/Shkodra Lake, West Stara Planina)
- Analysis of priority habitats and species (West Stara Planina)
- Survey on water resources (West Stara Planina)
- Survey on forest resources (West Stara Planina)

- Trans-boundary maps
- Workshops for local stakeholders, to identify priorities for trans-boundary cooperation
- Communication strategy (on the regional level – i.e. jointly for all three sites),
- Study on the roles and responsibilities of key management institutions and other relevant stakeholders (Skadar/Shkodra Lake)

Direct support to local players & launching cooperation mechanisms

Providing direct financial support to non-profit bodies and technical assistance to management authorities has been an important element of capacity building efforts.

NGOs received targeted grants and support in developing and implementing their projects. Through this approach the financial support provided also served as an opportunity for them to learn and better understand their role in the development of their communities. Following a pre-assessment of needs, basic equipment has been provided to resource management and education institutions (national park authorities, environmental inspectorates, local authorities, schools and universities), to enable them to better implement their missions.

Most project activities had a capacity building aspect – whether they focused on gathering information, the identification of priorities or developing small scale projects – still some of the actions were directly targeted to training local stakeholders. At the beginning of the project they mostly addressed topics like “objective-oriented planning”, project development and implementation and communication. The capacity building of site coordinators, acting as the local representatives of the project, was an important aspect. In addition to their participation on all (capacity building) events of the project, site coordinators have been trained on very practical aspects of project and office management, aided also by a study tour to another similar scale project in Bulgaria.

As a direct follow-up to earlier efforts towards setting priorities, environmental planning initiatives have been launched that always reflected the local development context. Joint strategies have been developed and environmental planning processes have been launched. Workshops on the development of topic-oriented action plans or dedicated to building local capacities on concrete environmental topics have been held. These initiatives were the first actions in the project where local stakeholders addressed details of concrete resource management topics, and took steps towards identifying measures.

Creating cooperation mechanisms to promote cross-border dialogue on the management of shared natural resources following the principles of democracy and transparency is among the key aims of the project. To this end Trans-boundary Forums have been established in all three sites. They function as informal cooperation bodies and neutral cross-border coordination platforms gathering key local stakeholders to discuss project activities and progress both on the nation and cross-border level. Forums were functioning in the context of the project – as for e.g. local project advisory bodies – but they were launched with the idea that on the long term they become a real player in local development processes and promoters of the sustainable development of the sites.

As a special aspect of cooperation, schools and other education institutions have been brought together to address the inclusion of environmental topics in the school curricula and improve their environmental education methods. Through this process the cross-border networking of schools has been launched, which remained a permanent component of the project until its end.

Further actions have been implemented to increase the involvement and awareness of local communities and ensuring a greater local ownership of the project. Awareness programmes have been developed tailored to the specific local needs and cultural circumstances, promotion and awareness materials have been created, and several social events (cross-border festivals, fairs and field trips) have been organised.

KEY OUTPUTS:

- 58 small-scale projects of local NGOs and other non-profit bodies awarded and implemented
- Technical assistance: equipment and terrain vehicle to the authority of the Skadar Lake National Park, Montenegro; basic office equipment to the Regional Environmental Inspectorate in Shkodra; portable chemistry laboratory to the University of Shkodra, Albania; basic office equipment to Serbian local authorities in West Stara Planina and to schools in the Neretva Delta region
- Trainings on proposal writing for NGOs from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania
- Training workshop and brochure on “objective oriented planning” for local and national management authorities from Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and Croatia
- Workshop on developing “Action plan for sensitive wetlands in Neretva Delta”
- Launch of the process of developing Local Environmental Action Plans (LEAP) in Serbian municipalities in West Stara Planina
- Outline of the Joint Rural Tourism Strategy for Neretva Delta, along with several cross-border tourism initiatives and proposals for action
- Regional Ecotourism Action Plan for West Stara Planina, as part of the Bulgarian National Ecotourism Strategy;
- Workshops for Neretva Delta stakeholders on sustainable agriculture and organic farming”
- Trans-boundary Forums of key stakeholders established in all three sites
- Training workshops for teachers on environmental education in Neretva delta and training manual on environmental education for teachers of schools in the Neretva Delta region (teachers` guide and a video with short environmental movies)
- Interactive nature education facilities in the Hutovo Blato Nature Park (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and the ornithological museum of Metkovic, Croatia
- Two environmental education workshops for teachers in the Skadar/Shkodra Lake and a brochure on the “Environment in the education system in Montenegro”
- Promotion materials - leaflets, brochures, websites, etc. developed and widely distributed
- Two cross-border festivals in West Stara Planina
- Bilateral activities with children from schools around the Skadar/Shkodra Lake (incl. field trips, visits, concerts, art workshops and exhibitions, cooperation among schools

form Cetinej, Montenegro and Shkodra, Albania).

Re-setting priorities: developing site specific action plans

Halfway through the project, in 2003 a region-wide planning process has been launched to redefine priorities based on results achieved in previous years. Strategic plans for 2004-2008 were drafted for each site and presented to the 6th Task Force Meeting of the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme (REReP) in October 2003. Representatives of the ministries of environment from all countries involved, NGOs and other key partners have been involved, including members of Trans-boundary Forums established in the previous phases. While site coordinators could not participate in initial preparations of the project, they had a very important role in facilitating this planning process on the local level. Through this they also received a special mandate for assuming more responsibilities and independence in defining activities for the next phase of the project. As the final outputs, the following goals and objectives have been formulated:

SITE-SPECIFIC GOAL AND OBJECTIVES for phase III

Neretva Delta: to contribute to the creation of conditions for integrated management of the Neretva Delta, through:

- Establishing a resource centre to enable local stakeholders to define, promote and defend clear priorities for nature protection and sustainable development of Neretva Delta;
- Raising awareness of local and regional stakeholders about natural and cultural values and wise use of resources;
- Building capacity of local population for sustainable development in Neretva Delta.

Skadar/Shkodra Lake: to ensure the sustainable use of shared natural and cultural resources, as a contribution to the local economy, through the development and implementation of selected elements of a cross-border management plan, in the following four main directions:

- Promotion of sustainable resource utilisation
- Capacity building
- Dialogue/partnership
- Education

West Stara Planina:

- Support and implement activities leading to effective cross-border management of natural resources
- Empower local stakeholders to improve their well-being through support and promotion of environmentally friendly tourism, agriculture and traditional crafts

Implementing action plans and concluding results

In the third phase of the project work followed the above site-specific objectives. As they were defined according to the local circumstances, accents were placed on different aspects in each project site. In the same time activities planned were a natural continuation of all those implemented before. Many processes launched through previous phases reached their completion in the third phase.

Activities focusing on gathering baseline information in the first and second phase turned into regular information services supporting the work of local stakeholders. Biodiversity databases developed in earlier stages have been enlarged and upgraded, or information collected before have been reorganised and published to reach a wider group of players. Trans-boundary maps have been further upgraded and finalised, to serve as the basis for further negotiations and the promotion of specific values of the region. Regular trans-boundary newsletters have been prepared, site-level websites have been established and promotion actions launched earlier became regular and established new traditions. As a signal of the appreciation of the site coordinators' work, stakeholders started to rely on site offices as key sources of environmental information.

Environmental education received a special attention in the Neretva Delta and Skadar/Shkodra Lake site, where it became the ground for the networking of schools on the two sides of the border. Activities focusing on the development of innovative education programmes continued and new educational tools have been developed upon the initiatives of local institutions.

Capacity building and direct support to local initiatives has been one of the core activities during the third phase. As a direct follow-up to the identification of common priorities, targeted trainings have been organised to address some of these – namely, topics of environmentally friendly agriculture, sustainable tourism, education and nature conservation. Local players, with the professional support of site coordinators and outside experts, developed their own ideas into small-scale demonstration projects, which have been later implemented with the financial support of the project. Processes serving the designation of new protected areas received the support of the project, which provided resources to relevant players for bringing these to completion.

In two of the sites – West Stara Planina and Skadar/Shkodra Lake – Local Environmental Action Plans have been completed and are by now adopted by local parliaments. In case of the latter the planning process served the establishment of relationships and cooperation between two cities on two sides of the lake – Cetinje in Montenegro and Shkodra in Albania.

Trans-boundary forums established in the second phase of the project have been significantly strengthened through their regular meetings and direct participation in other project activities. In West Stara Planina the Forum evolved into a formal cross-border body which now has its mandate to promote a trans-boundary approach in the development of the region. Local actors recognized the key importance of trans-boundary dialogue in all sites, and committed through various means to sustain it. Regular trans-boundary events have been launched, and several cross-border agreements have been signed.

Still, the long-term sustainability of trans-boundary cooperation mechanisms remains a task that will be addressed in the final phase of the project, to be implemented in 2007 and 2008. Towards the end of the current phase a last internal planning exercise has been carried out through a series of planning missions. The project team, with the support of SDC consultants, assessed the results achieved and identified follow-up actions for the years to come. It has been concluded that the process of creating a long-lasting institutional ground for trans-boundary cooperation is well underway but further efforts are necessary to completely pass the mandate of site offices – and the project itself – to local players. The establishment of trans-boundary stakeholder

forums is considered as one of the most important achievements. Forums become important cross-border coordination platforms, and running these platforms represents the core competence of the project. In order to capitalize best from this competence and to sustain cross-border cooperation in the future, forums will remain the focal point of project activities in 2007 and 2008. They will be further strengthened to become more official and independent bodies that would work towards the sustainable development of the three trans-boundary regions.

KEY OUTPUTS:

- Survey and database on bird species and butterflies, vegetation and flora (Neretva Delta);
- Publication on results of winter bird counting (Skadar/Shkodra Lake)
- Publication of studies on biodiversity, forest management and water resources (West Stara Planina);
- Trans-boundary maps presenting various features of the project sites
- Regular trans-boundary newsletters, bulletins and calendars;
- Trans-boundary websites hosted by key local players - i.e. national/nature park authorities, local authorities, etc.
- Large scale promotion events (summer festivals and fairs) and special promotion materials (brochures, films, etc.);
- Education materials and support to the networking of schools: bird-watching guide for children, regular cross-border meetings of schools and joint environmental education programmes (Neretva Delta); field trips for children across borders (Skadar/Shkodra Lake); children's summer camp on traditional crafts (West Stara Planina)
- Capacity building actions targeting nature conservation, environmentally friendly agriculture and sustainable tourism:
 - Workshop on sustainable development alternatives in protected areas; focus group meeting on the status and possibilities for rural tourism development; training on sustainable tourism development; focus group meetings on sustainable hunting & study on hunting and hunting areas, and training on public participation and Environmental Impact Assessment (Neretva Delta);
 - Training on developing Local Environmental Action Plans; sustainable tourism workshop for local tourism entrepreneurs and university students; workshop on traditional crafts and joint fair of producers; workshop on habitat typology (Skadar/Shkodra Lake);
 - Meetings of trans-boundary working groups on tourism and agriculture; workshop on trans-boundary Biosphere Reserves; agro-tourism workshop (West Stara Planina);
 - Training workshops on sustainable agriculture (Neretva Delta, West Stara Planina);
 - Study trips to similar regions in other countries;
- Direct support to local initiatives on nature conservation, environmentally friendly agriculture and sustainable tourism:
 - Support to the designation of the "West Balkan" Nature Park/promotion and public hearings; developing a regional walking trail, a network of tourist information centres and tourist maps; defining strategic directions for the development of sustainable agriculture; direct support to the "Centre of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development", interactive demonstration farm and local farmers association (West Stara Planina);
 - Support to family tourism development in traditional villages; support to the designation and declaration of a protected area and Ramsar Site on the Albanian

- side of Skadar/Shkodra Lake; developing nature tourism infrastructure - walking trails, information boards, promotion materials (Skadar/Shkodra Lake);
- Support to sustainable tourism development - promotion materials (Neretva Delta);
- Developing Local Environmental Action Plans (Skadar/Shkodra Lake, West Stara Planina).
- Regular meetings of Trans-boundary Forums;
- Trans-boundary agreements and formal cross-border initiatives:
 - Letter of Intent of municipalities/mayors on trans-boundary cooperation; EUROREGION West Stara Planina acting as a trans-boundary body to implement the letter of intent (West Stara Planina);
 - Memorandum of understanding between the Ministries of Environment of Albania and Montenegro (2003); Official declaration and memorandum of understanding of ministries concerning the celebration of the “Day of the Lake”; Declaration on Skadar/Shkodra Lake signed by members of the trans-boundary Skadar/Shkodra Lake Forum; Statement of Cooperation between the municipalities of Cetinje, Montenegro and Shkodra, Albania (Skadar/Shkodra Lake)
- Follow-up activities identified based on five years strategic plans through a facilitated process

The table below presents the sequence of different stages in the project, with more focus on the logical links among them. Most of these involve activities that ran longer than one stage or even one phase of the project.

THE LOGICAL SEQUENCE OF PROJECT STAGES	
<i>Step 0: Initial preparation, selection of pilot project sites</i>	
PHASE I: JUL-00 – JAN-02	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Step 1: Signature of the first project contract, official start of the project Step 2: Establishing project implementation structures at the local and national level: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Site offices & site coordinators ● Focal points in relevant ministries Step 3: Regional, local and trans-boundary project planning meetings Step 4: Gathering baseline information on specific local issues (studies) Step 5: Setting priorities and identifying issues of common interest Step 6: Identifying key local and national stakeholders & first awareness raising actions Step 7: Support to local NGO initiatives & technical assistance for management bodies I.
PHASE II: FEB-02 – FEB-04	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Step 8: Launching cross-border cooperation mechanisms - Trans-boundary Forums of local stakeholders Step 9: Carrying out joint studies, collecting biodiversity data, and developing joint maps Step 10: Capacity building actions for local stakeholders and Site Coordinators Step 11: Turning to real nature management issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Environmental action planning ● Addressing issues concerning nature conservation, sustainable tourism and environmentally friendly agriculture Step 12: Launching cooperation among education organizations on different sides of the border

Step 13:	Support to local NGO initiatives & technical assistance for management bodies II.
Step 14:	Awareness rising and “people-to-people” actions (festivals, promotion events)

Step 15: Internal project planning action - developing action plans and resetting goals and objectives for each cross-border site based on a synthesis and diagnosis of the present situation.

Site Coordinators are directly involved and for the next phase they are becoming the main drivers of the project, act as key sources of information and important players in local development processes

PHASE III: MAR-04 – DEC-06	Step 16:	Improving and extending information services to local stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further enlarging existing databases on biodiversity; • Site offices acting as information points for local stakeholders on an everyday basis • Upgrading and concluding trans-boundary maps • Regular trans-boundary newsletters, bulletins and promotion events
	Step 17:	Supporting environmental education initiatives and networking among schools.
	Step 18:	Capacity building actions and direct support to pilot initiatives in nature conservation, environmentally friendly agriculture and sustainable tourism.
	Step 19:	Strengthening Trans-boundary Forums and institutionalization of trans-boundary cooperation mechanisms
	Step 20:	Addressing the long term sustainability of results & looking at possible follow-up activities to pass mandates of site offices to local players

PARTNERS IN THE PROCESS

WHO WAS INVOLVED?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Authorities; • Schools and other education institutions (children and teachers); • Local NGOs; • Natural resource management bodies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ National/Nature Park Authorities; ○ Water Management Authorities; ○ Environmental Inspectorates; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media; • Small businesses in agriculture & tourism; • Farmers, hunters, fishermen & craftsmen; • Producers` associations; • National governmental organisations. • Academic and research institutions; • National experts and their networks.

All results have been achieved through the inputs of many players representing organisations of very different character. Unlike in many other projects, stakeholder involvement was not only one of the key tools to ensure success, but the main goal as well. Besides their more narrow purpose, all activities served as mechanisms to engage local players, and to build through that long-lasting and efficient cross-border dialogue.

Trans-boundary Forums of key stakeholders were one of the key mechanisms designed to serve this purpose.

Due to the cross-border character of the project and specifics of national administrations, stakeholder involvement had to reach beyond the local level. Activities have been coordinated with relevant governmental bodies – ministries responsible for environment, agriculture, forestry, tourism and education and relevant research institutions. National focal points have been nominated by Ministries of Environment. National bodies concerned with the management of natural resources, academic institutions and national experts provided their support on topics within their areas of work.

On the local level the project tried to reach all segments of the society, Local Authorities being one of the key players targeted. Twenty-four municipalities have been involved in the project at levels varying from site to site. In some of the sites they became the main drivers of trans-boundary cooperation processes and they expressed their willingness to do this through various formal and less formal means.

Local schools and education institutions acted as important multipliers in the project. They directly participated in awareness raising efforts and cross-border events, and throughout the project they built a real cross-border network that started to work together on promoting specific values of the region. Their efforts in developing innovative environmental education programmes have been also supported.

The important role civil society can play in the local and trans-boundary context has been recognized, local NGOs – generally weak and lacking human and financial resources – being the main beneficiaries of granting programmes.

Being rich in biodiversity, all three sites are at least partially included in national systems of protected areas. In the same time they are exploited through various human uses, which calls for a coordinated approach to the management and protection of natural resources if one wants to ensure long term sustainability. In the same time local or regional level management bodies face major challenges due to their limited

capacities in terms of budget and trained personnel, and insufficient infrastructure. It is just an additional shortcoming that while protected ecosystems are shared by two countries, conservation and management efforts are often one-sided, and efficient mechanisms to harmonise approaches on the two sides are lacking. Therefore, protected areas' authorities, and other bodies concerned with the management and protection of natural resources – i.e. water authorities, environmental inspectorates, forestry organisations – have been directly addressed by the project. They have been involved not only as key members of trans-boundary forums, but also as beneficiaries of direct technical assistance actions, and partners to NGOs or schools in implementing their small-scale projects.

Efforts directly addressing resource management issues were often supported by academic and research institutions located in the region – e.g. the University of Shkodra, Albania, the University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Oceanographic Institute in Dubrovnik, Croatia and the National Institute for Nature Protection, Montenegro. They provided their experience and technical capacity while benefiting from the exchange of information, and possibilities to test their expertise in very concrete situations.

As a traditional group of resource users, small agriculture and tourism businesses, local farmers, fishermen, hunters and craftsmen took part in the project as recipients of capacity building and awareness raising actions. Very often they were the partners or target groups of small-scale initiatives of local NGOs, authorities and other players.

Finally, in order to inform everybody potentially interested in the project, local media organisations – newspapers, TV and radio stations, etc. – have been involved in the project from the early beginning. Members of local media networks have been trained in conveying environmental messages, and later they acted as the important communicators of project events and local environmental problems to the wider local public.

The role of the Regional Environmental Center (REC)

REC'S CHALLENGE:

... to ensure efficiency, high quality outputs and real changes through interventions on very different levels – regional, national and local – while mobilising a very diverse group of actors and mediate cooperation among countries and communities historically divided.

At the first Task Force Meeting of the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme for South Eastern European (SEE), upon the decision of SEE governments and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation the REC has been mandated to implement this project.

As a response to the challenge the REC had to adapt its structures and introduce new methods of work. In addition to its network composed of Country Offices in its sixteen beneficiary countries – among them also those involved in the project – and its Headquarters in Szentendre, Hungary, site offices have been established. The project structure went through several stages of development, becoming more and more decentralised towards the end of the project. The REC headquarters had a key role in the first two phases in setting up the implementation structure and directly supervising

and coordinating actions on both the level of sites and that of the region. Throughout the project capacities of site coordinators have been strengthened: they improved their project management skills, they became real “agents of change” in their communities, and they started to act as real players within the networks of local stakeholders. During the third phase site coordinators became the actual managers of the project on the local level, becoming fully responsible for activities carried out in the sites. But even at this stage their work has been supported by the well established network of REC Country Offices and backstopping services of the REC Headquarters.

To perform their work at high professional standards they received expert support and assistance in financial and office management from the relevant REC Country Offices. The overall responsibility for the management of the project and the quality of outputs has been assumed by the REC Headquarters, which provided a full time project manager and international biodiversity expert.

The Regional Environmental Center – an organisation traditionally engaged in building environmental democracy and facilitating multi-stakeholder processes – played a key role in the project providing its fifteen years of experience and ensuring a neutral platform for building trans-boundary dialogue and cooperation.

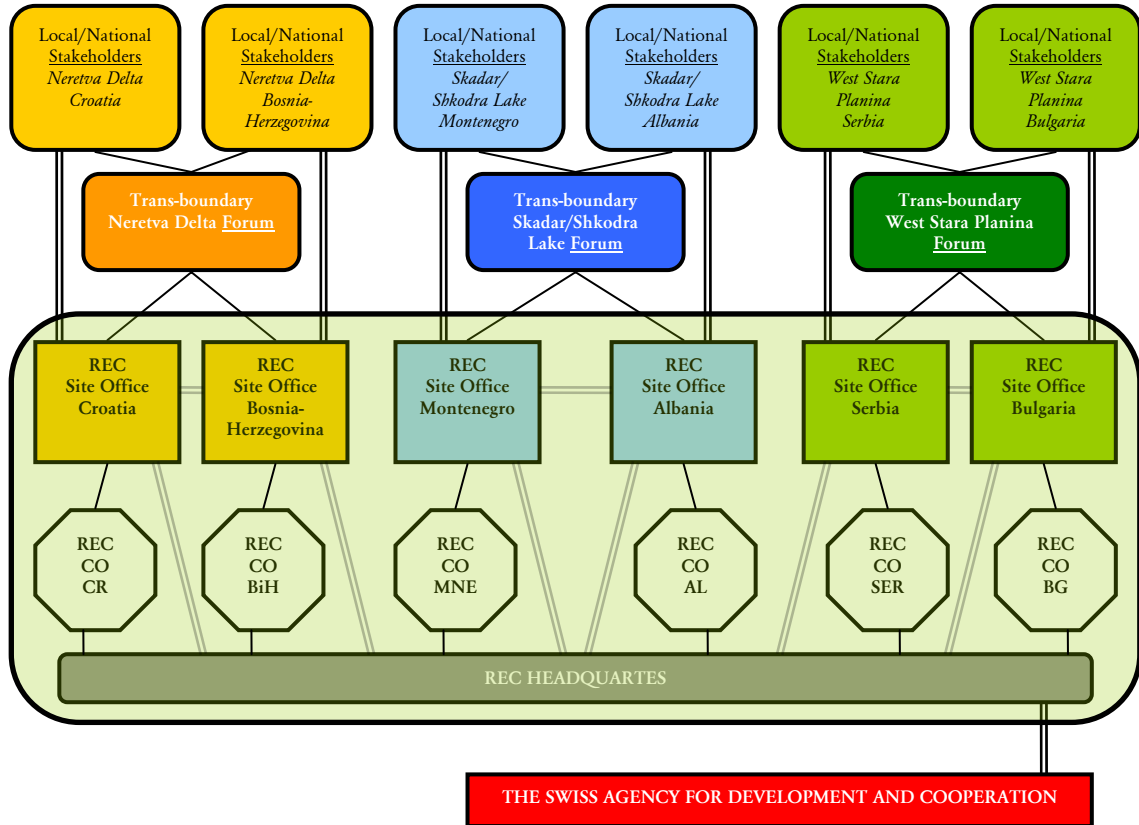
REC`S ADDED VALUE:

- A region-wide network of offices covering all countries of South Eastern Europe;
- A multidisciplinary expert team with over 30 nationalities working on various topics within the field of environment;
- An international status and a special role in the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme, making the REC an accepted partner of governments in the region and beyond;
- A traditional role in mediating among different interests, facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue and building environmental democracy;
- The ability – and mandate – to act simultaneously at the regional, national and local level;
- Flexibility and readiness to adapt to new situations.

The unique nature of the project required not only flexibility and readiness to adapt to new situations, but also a very close work of the REC – as the implementing organisation – and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), as the donor of the project. SDC delegated independent experts to monitor the implementation of the project. To this end several monitoring and evaluation missions have been carried out. SDC consultants provided direct inputs to certain project activities as well as valuable feedbacks and suggestions concerning possible adjustments to the project. While doing so, they indirectly contributed to building the capacities of the project team. However, in this respect direct contributions have been also made, among others by inviting REC site coordinators to a one week study tour to Switzerland and the trans-boundary site of Lake Constance.

The internal organisation of the project is presented in the below chart:

Fig 1: Project organisation chart



PART III – APPROACH AND KEY OUTCOMES

HOW IT HAPPENED AND WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

Re-establishing trans-boundary dialogue and mutual trust after military conflicts and enabling local actors to manage shared natural resources in a sustainable manner were the two main tasks of the project. A process of dialogue had to be launched to involve partners and countries whose cooperation is a key pre-requisite for addressing resource management issues in a trans-boundary context. Grounds had to be established so that such a process – involving many smaller-scale processes – becomes sustainable, and can bring its contribution to achieving the more distant goal of the project: the sustainable management of shared natural resources.

Besides dialogue among countries and that among communities on the two sides of the border, the integration of local communities into national processes has been an important aspect. Efforts were made to improve cooperation among local and national level governments, and include targeted cross-border sites into national strategic documents and processes related to biodiversity protection and environment.

The nature of the project has been unique in the region, with no possibilities to import the knowledge and experience of others. This required flexibility by both the implementer and the donor. Without the openness of the donor, SDC, the REC would have not been able to address local problems in a way that fits to the specific cultural, economic and natural circumstances of sites.

A common methodology has been introduced – building on the below presented key elements – which was later on adapted to the specific needs and factors appearing in the three project sites.

MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE APPROACH

1. Relying on an international cooperation framework to ensure national ownership over the project;
2. Perceiving the project as an open-ended process – building the next step on the previous one;
3. Fostering local participation and engaging as many stakeholders as possible from the very beginning;
4. Working with priorities that have been identified by local stakeholders, based on the information collected by themselves;
5. Establishing permanent trans-boundary bodies to engage stakeholders in regular cross-border dialogue and in planning project activities in a joint effort with the project team;
6. Bringing communities around a joint vision;
7. Constantly investing in empowering local actors to become leaders of trans-boundary processes;
8. Allowing stakeholders to take real action and learn from their own results by supporting pilot local initiatives;
9. Promoting a positive regional image through trans-boundary promotion actions and by bringing communities together.

Ensuring national ownership

The Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme (REReP) for South Eastern Europe served as regional framework that ensured the political will and ownership of the countries involved.

Without the political will and the ownership of national governments it would have been impossible for the project to address issues of trans-boundary concern. Even if problems addressed were mostly of local character, they often interfered with national level processes – new strategies, designation of protected areas, etc. – and required national level participation.

In this respect the project benefited from the fact that it was running under the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme, a framework that was built on the strong political will of countries under the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe to integrate environmental concerns in the process of their reconstruction and development. However, this would have not been sufficient without the high level of ownership of the countries involved, and the support provided by the international donor community.

As the neutral facilitator of the REReP process, the Regional Environmental Center received the trust and support of national governments involved in the project. They expressed their commitment by nominating ministerial focal points to act as key contacts for the project, and by providing direct contributions in political and financial terms, or with their expertise.

The increasing commitment of local actors also contributed to mobilising national ownership. Results achieved in the three cross-border sites lead to commitments on the national level concerning the future development of the sites as well as to the inclusion of locally identified priorities into national strategic planning documents.

The project as an open-ended process

Planning and implementation go hand in hand; the project stays opened towards including new activities in response to new opportunities arising, and addressing new target groups based on their interests.

The project works in the rather diverse and difficult local context of the three cross-border sites, it addresses simultaneously various levels of decision making, and, besides some very concrete end-results, it seeks to deliver and maintain a sustainable process. These very specific characteristics are reflected in the design of the project.

The sustainable management of natural resources and preserving natural and cultural heritage while delivering benefits to local communities are at the heart of the project. In the same time it runs in parallel with concrete local development process. Besides supporting these, the project intends to build on the new opportunities arising, and seeks to help local actors to utilise them. This entails that a process of regular planning is to be maintained in the project, local stakeholders need to be involved in that, and there has to be a possibility to include new activities in response to new opportunities or specific local interests.

In the first years of its implementation the project focused entirely on establishing relationships, initiating dialogue and creating networks for communication and partnership. Most activities had a social orientation and aimed at fostering a positive attitude and trust among stakeholders. Activities delivering more tangible outputs appeared towards the second phase. The ultimate objective of these was to reward the efforts of local players with common results that were achieved through their cooperation and belong to the entire cross-border community. Joint initiatives and processes launched in the second phase have been broadened and completed in the third phase. But even at this stage space had to be secured for new stakeholder groups or new issues to enter the process.

EXAMPLE 1 – Addressing local aspirations and adapting to national and international processes in West Stara Planina:

In the first phase of the project work in the West Stara Planina site included four municipalities on the Bulgarian side – Belogradchik, Berkovitz, Chiprovtsi and Chuprene – and four on the Serbian side – Dimitrovgrad, Pirot, Knjazevac and Zajechar. As cooperation among the municipalities evolved the geographical scope has been extended and three more municipalities joined on the Bulgarian side as they all felt they are inseparable parts of the region. The project reflected these local aspirations by involving the municipalities of Georgi Damjanovo, Godech and Vurshetz. The openness of the project towards new stakeholder groups has been kept until the very end. At a later stage in the project, where a public campaign for designating a large portion of the area as a Nature Park had been launched, the municipality of Svoje became involved as well.

The flexible character of the project manifested in other contexts as well. Important national and international processes have been launched while the project was running. Local stakeholders regarded them important for the future of their region and expressed their interest to get involved. As a response the project sought to help them in their aspirations and linked many of its activities to these processes. For example, activities of the second and third phases focusing on developing environmentally friendly tourism have been to a great extent determined by the process of formulating the Bulgarian National Ecotourism Strategy. The project facilitated the development and implementation of the Regional Ecotourism Action Plan for West Stara Planina as an integral part of the national strategy. In 2005-2006 the European Commission's Neighbourhood Programme for Cross-Border Cooperation became one of the main tools to support trans-boundary projects in the region. Following the needs of stakeholders, many project activities targeted to support the preparation of local stakeholders to develop their own projects under the programme. Preparing project proposals with the support of the project team were an important activity of trans-boundary working groups established within the project.

Fostering local participation

The project launches with great efforts to involve as many local players as possible, and seeks to keep them involved for future actions.

Local participation and ownership of local stakeholders have been both the goal and a precondition for any success. The mandate of the REC to serve as a neutral platform in the local context and trans-boundary discussions could be imagined only in relation to local stakeholders engaging in such processes.

To ensure this, dialogue has been started at the widest possible scope, involving anybody interested through several local kick-off events – the so called “Get Everyone

Involved Meetings” – and regional planning meetings, engaging actors on both the national and local level and from all countries involved. Site-level discussion platforms resulted in the nomination of representatives for cross-border regional planning working groups, bringing together over 150 representatives from the countries involved, including representatives of government agencies, local authorities, research and business communities, schools, and civil society.

Local participation has been initiated and guided by several fundamental principles:

- Participatory and integrative approaches are concepts from the domain of public management, which have been successfully applied in the management of protected natural sites;
- Partnership and participation destroys dependence on old, authoritative and centralized governance models;
- Partnerships and cooperation, features of stakeholder participation, are characteristics of an emerging civil society, and can substantially strengthen democratic processes;
- Broad-scale stakeholder participation creates conditions for community ownership, openness to capacity building actions and empowerment.

Each step of the project was decided upon based on the joint analysis of the achievements and identification of needs. This strong local involvement from the very start enabled stakeholders to come up with a strong vision and establish priorities they believed in.

EXAMPLE 3 – Workshop on setting a joint vision and steps for its realisation at Skadar/Shkodra Lake:

In July 2001 countries sharing the Skadar/Shkodra Lake defined their common vision: “A Cross-border protected area of Skadar/Shkodra Lake and Buna/Bojana River that provides benefits and sustainable development for the local population of the region”. Arriving to this statement was one of the most important milestones of the project at the Skadar/Shkodra Lake site, which was paving the road for future activities. Formulating and sharing the same vision for the cross-border site showed the commitment of the countries’ representatives towards trans-boundary cooperation, and their understanding concerning the necessity of bilateral work on the protection and development of the region.

The project directly supported the formulation of such a common vision of local actors through an interactive workshop titled “Cross-border Cooperation: A Vision and its realization”, organized for the cross-border sites of the Neretva Delta and Skadar/Shkodra Lake. The event brought together representatives of ministries responsible for environmental protection in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro, institutions involved in management of the cross-border sites (e.g. park authorities, environmental and water directorates, etc.), representatives of local authorities and non-governmental organizations from the countries involved. The two-day workshop served to perform an assessment of the current situation and identify possibilities for joint coordinated actions.

Explaining the importance of a common vision within a joint strategic planning (i.e. the definition of a vision, how to formulate it, and what major steps have to be made in order to realize the vision) was among the main goals of the workshop. After reaching the understanding of participants, working groups of different countries worked separately on formulating their own vision. These vision statements were then discussed and debated until a joint cross-border vision has been reached.

Identifying priorities locally

Local stakeholders are engaged in identifying specific needs, gathering and analysing baseline information and elaborating their priorities based on these.

Once local participation has been launched, further efforts were needed to keep it alive and sustainable on the long-term. Several methodologies have been used for this, all representing an important milestone in the project. Defining priorities for local development and trans-boundary cooperation has been one of these.

Lack of knowledge about biodiversity and shared natural resources, unavailability of sufficient and up-to-date information and lack of unified approaches of collecting biodiversity and environmental data have been perceived as key obstacles for the development of joint trans-boundary management approaches. As a response, teams of local and national experts from neighbouring countries worked together on gathering and analysing available information. As a result joint studies have been elaborated, which served as a direct input for continued trans-boundary dialogue and defining local priorities.

Common methodologies for assessing shared resources, the practicing of local experts in dealing with local environmental issues and the availability of new information for the benefits of management authorities were important by-products of this work. Still, the overall purpose was not to deliver maximum quality scientific studies, which perhaps could have been well performed by international consultant teams. Instead, the goals were to get relevant local players involved and trained on the process, and ensure local inputs to trans-boundary debates.

EXAMPLE 2 – Identifying priority activities for the protection of the Neretva Delta:

Strengthening water management institutions and trans-boundary cooperation on water issues, addressing concrete water problems – such as the protection of springs, water level oscillations or the intrusion of salty sea water – strengthening the cooperation of local authorities, counteracting illegal constructions, improving land registration systems, promoting values related biodiversity, environment and healthy food and providing better access to environmental information are all priorities selected by local stakeholders of the Neretva Delta region.

Shortly after the launch of the project, in spring 2001, for the first time in region's recent history, a trans-boundary expert group has been established, engaging thirteen experts from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in assessing the current state of the environment, and defining key issues of concern in the area. Main topics addressed included:

- Rights for water use;
- Relationships between hydrological dynamics of the river and the protection of biodiversity values of the delta;
- Socio-economic situation in settlements of the region;
- Impacts of main economic activities – e.g. fishing, hunting, agriculture, transport, spatial development; and
- Environmental awareness of key groups of the local society.

The methodology of work has been worked out in a joint effort of the project team and the experts, while the outcomes of their work have been discussed in details by more than 50 representatives of different local players, including local authorities, hydropower stations, water authorities, non-governmental organizations, scientists and teachers. Discussions took

part in an extensive – three days long – facilitated interactive workshop organized also to promote a highly cooperative approach to the conservation of natural values of the region. As one of the main outputs of the workshop, a detailed list of priority activities has been developed. These – together with main findings of all surveys and the process leading to their elaboration – were published in a booklet in order to reach an as wide group of local and national stakeholders as possible.

Although the lack of reliable information and the limited environmental awareness of the local population have been found as the most significant obstacles, priorities identified through these efforts created a solid base for defining further activities of the project and also for ensuring an increased local ownership over these.

Joint planning of actions and maintaining trans-boundary dialogue

Trans-boundary forums serve as a project advisory body to support the planning of activities and the main platform for trans-boundary dialogue.

Permanent trans-boundary forums represented another key methodology to maintain local participation and transparency in the project. Forums composed of key local stakeholders from both sides of the border – e.g. NGOs, local authorities, schools, tourism boards, water management authorities, nature conservation authorities, national parks, environmental inspectorates, etc. – directly contributed to defining and planning activities. To ensure their involvement regular forum meetings have been organised several times a year. Additionally, REC site coordinators, the main facilitators of this process on the local level, maintained a close cooperation with forum members. In this way the mandate of local stakeholders to act as a real player in the development of their regions has been substantially strengthened.

As an informal body, forums were also the first seeds of institutionalised trans-boundary dialogue. They developed at different speed in different sites – still following a common concept – and in some cases they became legally registered bodies to promote trans-boundary dialogue in the future. Their role and scope of work significantly expanded from initially being a project planning and consultation mechanism to becoming real actors in the planning and implementation of regional and cross-border policy. From being a representation of different actors and the more narrow interests of local communities, forums evolved into bodies developing strategic approaches for their whole trans-boundary region.

Trans-boundary communities are developing their joint vision

Local stakeholders from cross-border sites engage in developing their joint vision and objectives for a five years period.

It is a key characteristic of the project that its arena is the community. Even though government authorities contributed authority and influence, the project itself has been driven by local communities sharing the feeling of ownership for the common natural resources. This attitude proved to be strong enough to overcome borders and alleviate cross-border tensions. Regardless of the country they were coming from, people became members of new cross-border communities united by the awareness that the natural entity they are based on is common and it is their joint responsibility to preserve and manage it in a sustainable manner.

After several years of implementation, towards the end of the second phase, site level processes significantly matured: priorities and main directions for future action have been defined, and the first results provided a positive feedback to all involved in the project. Site coordinators fully integrated into local networks of key players, and trans-boundary forums became well established and accepted. At this stage the process of defining a joint vision for the three trans-boundary communities has been launched. Site coordinators and the project team worked together with local stakeholders to re-set priorities and define the vision and objectives for activities over the following five years – from 2003 to 2008 – and beyond. Although these were to serve the development of project action plans for the third phase, they also provided an opportunity to assess results and engage local actors in defining their roles for the future. As an end-result of this process a diagnosis of the current situation has been carried out and concrete action plans have been developed for all three sites.

Empowering local actors

Capacity building – targeted training actions and “learning by doing” – is a permanent component that helps local stakeholders to become real partners, gain new knowledge and skills, understand the importance of the integrated management of natural resources and realize specific development potentials.

In the context of the project “empowering of local actors” means raising their awareness on key issues related to the management of natural resources, building their capacities for taking action and increase the understanding of specific development potentials that local communities have.

Members of local communities were often not valuing the high natural richness of their region, nor the specific development potentials this brings to them. Their abilities and motivations to participate in the project as real partners therefore were limited at the beginning. The new types of cross-border relationships envisioned required new skills and capacities, which had to be developed during the initial period of implementation, and continued throughout the whole project. The need for intervention was clear when sites were selected based on their initial appraisal, but this was understood by a wider range of actors only when issues like nature conservation, the sensitivity of natural resources or the need to preserve them have been raised.

To improve capacities of local stakeholders a complementary set of tools has been applied including the following main elements:

- Disseminating knowledge and understanding of natural and cultural values through topic oriented training actions targeting local stakeholder groups;
- Developing site-specific solutions to address nature conservation problems together with affected stakeholders and with the application of their traditional knowledge;
- Providing information on alternative approaches to the use of natural resources – such as organic agriculture, sustainable tourism, and linking nature conservation efforts with agriculture and rural tourism;
- Assist local players in developing their initiatives into concrete projects and in raising additional funds for their implementation;

- Establish links among organisations dealing with conservation and management to facilitate the exchange of experience and the transfer of best practices across borders and among project sites;
- Strengthening the capacities of local and national decision-makers to develop and implement action plans for the management of protected areas and important natural resources;
- Training of trainers. Focus on building and retaining knowledge and expertise on the local level that could be further disseminated to the whole communities.

Besides activities designed to train local stakeholders, all project activities had capacity building aspects. Stakeholders were not only exposed to new knowledge, but they also received opportunities to apply this in concrete situations. This allowed them to learn about innovative tools and approaches, and to make decisions on how to utilise these in their own community.

EXAMPLE 4 – Support to developing environmentally friendly tourism and sustainable agriculture in West Stara Planina:

Local actors defined environmentally friendly tourism as a major development opportunity for West Stara Planina. Therefore the project supported the development of environmentally friendly tourism throughout the entire project. At the same time support has been used to maintain a development process concerning this topic and empower local stakeholders in planning and implementing their priorities. In 2003 more than fifty local stakeholders participated in drafting the Regional Ecotourism Action Plan for West Stara Planina, also as part of the National Ecotourism Strategy of Bulgaria. In 2004 local communities designed concrete activities for achieving the action plan. In this period extensive trainings were provided on principles of eco-tourism, business planning and marketing. Local stakeholders also received financial and expert assistance to implement most important elements of their action plan. It is the most impressive concrete achievement that in 2004-2006 local stakeholders developed a regional ecotourism product based on a 150 kilometres long tourist trail and a trans-boundary network of Tourist Information Centres. The project then focused on building capacities of those involved and strengthening their networking. The staff of Tourist Information Centres also became members of the Trans-boundary Working Group on Tourism. Currently the network of Tourist Information Centres is the backbone of the development of environmentally friendly tourism in West Stara Planina.

While Bulgarian stakeholders had a specific interest to lead on activities concerning tourism, stakeholders from the Serbian side took the lead concerning the development of sustainable agriculture (still keeping the cross-border character of the project through frequent exchanges on both topics). In 2004 the trans-boundary working group on sustainable agriculture has been established. Regular meetings of the working group that followed were combined with trainings on organic farming, study visits to organic farms, workshops on the conservation of agro-biodiversity and branding of agriculture products. The project also supported concrete local initiatives, such as the establishment of a local organisation, the “Centre for Sustainable Rural Development of the Knjazevac Area”, or establishing an interactive demonstration farm in Dimitrograd.

In 2006 the “Association for Rural Development in Stara Planina” has been established in a joint effort of local mayors.

In order to summarize the efforts of local stakeholders and respond to their interest in developing on this field a strategic document has been prepared by the project team. The document has been prepared based on the data collected through a detailed survey and several meetings with key local stakeholders. The paper identifies directions for developing sustainable agriculture in the four Serbian municipalities of West Stara Planina. Although it

focuses only on the Serbian side of the mountain, it represents the ownership of the trans-boundary working group, and it serves as a model for similar initiatives on the Bulgarian side. The document is expected to become an important basis for developing specific rural development action plans and concrete project, also in a trans-boundary setting.

As demonstrated above, the project empowered local stakeholders to approach strategically their aspirations by guiding them through the whole cycle from planning to final implementation. Through this also the long-term sustainability of results is better ensured by having a strong local ownership in the whole process and the capacities of all involved strengthened to best fulfil their responsibilities.

EXAMPLE 5 - Promoting the development of sustainable rural tourism in the Neretva Delta:

Most stakeholders in the Neretva Delta region consider tourism as one of the main development directions. The natural wealth of the area and its rich historical and cultural heritage provide good opportunities for developing small-scale rural tourism businesses. Such tourism products can provide attractive alternatives to the large amount of tourists visiting famous tourism destinations in the vicinity of the delta.

To further promote these opportunities and support local stakeholders in taking action several activities have been implemented, starting from the beginning of the project.

In July 2002 over a hundred key stakeholders - relevant governmental agencies, representatives of local communities, tourist companies, small businesses, farmers and NGOs - engaged in discussing challenges, problems and possibilities for the development of rural tourism through joint trans-boundary actions in the framework of a workshop titled "Joint Rural tourism Strategy in the Neretva Delta". The workshop has been organised around four main topics - (1) the management of protected areas and rural tourism; (2) advertising natural attractions; (3) biodiversity and geomorphology in protected areas; and (4) sociological and cultural aspects of rural tourism - and provided inputs to national authorities and local stakeholders for the elaboration of a draft rural tourism strategy.

As a direct follow-up to the workshop the first trans-boundary publication promoting sustainable tourism development in the region has been developed. A core group of local stakeholders also participated in a study tour to learn about tourism development examples implemented in another wetland area of Croatia, the "Lonjsko Polje" Nature Park.

The work of stakeholders has been further facilitated through several workshops. Direct support has been also provided for developing concrete project ideas in this field. In a first attempt to develop concrete actions the preparation of a bird watching and canoeing guide has been proposed. Due to the unclear protection status of the Croatian side of the delta, implementation had to be postponed, following the indications of relevant national authorities.

However, further efforts of stakeholders in this respect have been successful. Some of the activities proposed received the financial support of the Croatian Ministry of Tourism and other donors (e.g. UNDP-GEF), while others were supported by the small grants facility of the present project.

As one of the last steps in the project concerning tourism development in Neretva Delta, a set of promotion materials has been prepared, including a poster and a brochure presenting main natural beauties and tourism destinations of the region.

Direct support to local initiatives

Initiatives of local players are developed into concrete actions and are implemented, which provides opportunities to learn and positive feedbacks, which encourages stakeholders to take action in the future.

As a locally rooted project that seeks to provide benefits locally, initiatives of stakeholders were treated as expressions of local needs that require attention and support. Many were triggered by the project itself, but as the project evolved ad-hoc initiatives were replaced by very concrete local processes, which – with some additional support from the project – could reach their completion. In this way local actors could not only deliver something beneficial to their communities, but they could also learn, and get rewarded for taking action.

These support actions served issues like the designation of new protected areas, the development and partial implementation of Local Environmental Action Plans, the development of joint tourism products (e.g. tourist trails and tourist information centres), establishment of agricultural demonstration centres, promotion and awareness activities.

Support to civil society has been a special component involving several rounds of small grants. NGO projects on various topics have been supported, with the aim to strengthen the capacities of local NGOs, and engage them in nature conservation, environmental education and public participation actions. The range of organisations eligible for support has been extended later to other non-profit organisations. In the third phase of the project the opened granting procedure has been changed to targeted grants, where a larger amount of funds has been given for well articulated projects developed in cooperation with site coordinators.

NGO support programmes addressed topics, such as clean-up actions and campaigns promoting natural values and their conservation; education and awareness actions targeting resource users – fishermen, farmers, etc.; public participation in environmental decision making, with a special focus on local problems; meetings and events targeting the development of joint solutions to environmental problems; eco-tourism and nature conservation initiatives and traditional crafts; public awareness and environmental education.

EXAMPLE 6 – Grants programme, Neretva Delta:

“Promoting cross-border cooperation and networking concerning the protection and sustainable use of natural resources” was the theme of the first concrete step of the project taken to enable civil society organisations to carry out concrete activities on biodiversity protection, sustainable development and the wise use of resources. A financial support programme supporting small-scale initiatives of local NGOs and other non-profit organizations – schools, academic institutions, culture centres, libraries, tourist organizations and local authorities – has been launched in May 2001, following a two days long training course on project preparation and management.

Thirty-six proposals were received and evaluated by an expert panel called the Local Advisory Board, and following its decision, fourteen projects were awarded. A total amount of EUR 40000 has been distributed through the programme, to projects involving activities as follows:

- Cleaning and revitalising fishing grounds and assessing possibilities for increasing fish production in the Neretva Delta by exploring locations, techniques and economic

conditions for cultivating temperate freshwater fish species

- Promoting the Sustainable use of agro-chemicals through radio shows, leaflets, posters and professional lectures
- Actions aiming to increase the knowledge and environmental awareness of elementary and middle school pupils, including ecology workshops and lessons in nature, planting indigenous vegetable species in school gardens, nature education programmes focusing on the use of indigenous medicinal plants and eco-bulletins
- Protection measures targeting the conservation of wild horses in the Hutovo Blato Nature Park and its surroundings
- Studying linkages between morphological characteristics and legends of the Neretva River basin
- Gathering information and assessing various aspects and components of local biological diversity and landscape values, including vegetation, amphibians and important caves
- Awareness rising actions such as workshops, posters, lectures, discussions, TV shows and newsletters

Awarded projects were implemented by local NGOs and other not-for-profit organisations, including primary schools, the University of Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, fishing associations, the Hutovo Blato Nature Park Public Authority, and the Institute for Public Health in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

EXAMPLE 7 – Grants programme, Skadar/Shkodra Lake:

To support activities of non-governmental organisations dealing with the protection of the Skadar/Shkodra Lake and encourage their cooperation with similar organisation on the other side of the border, two grant distribution programmes have been implemented.

The first call, announced in March 2001 resulted in the distribution of a total amount of EUR 40000. Twenty-two local projects – 13 in Montenegro and 9 in Albania – have been selected by the so called „Local Advisory Board”, involving the following activities:

- Raising the awareness of fishermen, fishing organisations and other relevant stakeholders on environmental problems related to fishing, the sustainable use of resources, regulations and licences, rules of fishing in protected areas and other issues, through special guidance materials and multi-stakeholder workshops
- Promotion materials – posters, leaflets, TV programmes – focusing on specific natural values (flora, fauna, protected bird species) of the lake and cultural monuments (historical sites) of the region
- Local campaigns to increase the awareness of citizens on key issues related to the sustainable management and protection of the lake – illegal fishing, hunting of water birds and the disturbance of nesting places of protected bird species – and the need for cross-border cooperation
- Education materials and other actions to raise the awareness of schoolchildren concerning the natural values of the lake and the necessity of its protection, including an eco-camp for scouts focusing on freshwater ecology
- Assessment of the state of biodiversity of the south-eastern shores of the lake and discussing necessary protection measures with local communities and nature park authorities
- Clean-up actions and other field activities – e.g. tree plantations – involving local citizens, primary school pupils and students
- School exchanges to raise the environmental awareness of students and to improve their knowledge on specific issues related to the lake’s management

The second call announced in 2003 encouraged cross-border cooperation of non-profit organisations in the more concrete context of cooperative projects. Twenty applications have been submitted ten of which have been awarded in a total amount of EUR 40000. All projects were implemented through the cooperation of two organisations – one from Albania and one from Montenegro, and involved the following activities:

- Gathering information on biodiversity, former research and other projects, creating joint databases and developing information centres (joint websites and physical installations) available for the interested public
- Promoting local traditions and supporting the evolution of a strong regional identity through special materials – e.g. album with photos from the past and present, cookbook with traditional recipes – and events – cross-Border sailing competition and a joint fair of traditional crafts
- Promoting the lake as an eco-tourism destination through publishing a tourist guide focusing on biodiversity values, and erecting billboards for tourists
- Cross-border exchanges of University students
- Trans-boundary training workshop for inhabitants living on the lakeshore on the protection of natural resources and sustainable economic development opportunities

Although NGOs were the main target group of the programme awarded projects involved a wide range of local players, including also middle-schools and high-schools, the Education directorate in Shkodra, Albania, tourist associations, scout clubs, the Skadar Lake National Park authority in Montenegro and the Regional Environmental Inspectorate in Shkodra, Albania and the University of Shkodra.

EAXMPLE 8 – Grants programme, West Stara Planina:

In West Stara Planina nineteen small-scale initiatives of non-governmental organisations and other non-profit bodies received financial support from the project along with trainings on how to develop and manage projects and prepare project proposals and financial reports according to the specific rules of the programme. Fourteen applications have been received from Bulgaria, of which eleven have been approved, while Serbian organisations developed eighteen, of which eight have been awarded. Many projects involved cross-border cooperation as an important element and although the programme was announced separately in the two countries, many projects covered the same topics and links between implementing organisations have been established. During the preparation of their projects applicants sought and received the support of local authorities and other institutions, resulting in the involvement of multiple stakeholders. The local importance of the programme is well reflected by that fact that as one of its direct consequences new NGO, the Nature Protection Society has been established in Belogradchik, Bulgaria.

The list of organisations implementing projects under the programme includes several local NGOs, cultural institutions (culture houses, libraries), tourism councils and associations and local authorities. Local projects supported by the programme included activities as presented below:

- Promotion materials – booklets, catalogue of main attractions, promotion videos, guidebook – and other actions to raise the awareness of the interested public and citizens living in the region concerning the natural environment and to promote natural and cultural values also as tourism attractions
- Promoting eco-tourism also as sustainable source of local income through training local citizens on principles of eco-tourism, repairing nature trails, exploring specific karst formations, improving visitors' infrastructure, publishing information materials and organising promotion events

- Promoting the production and marketing of traditional crafts through establishing an exhibition centre, forming a local association of craftsmen and promotion materials and events
- Reviving and promoting the local tradition of colouring wool with natural materials among others through education seminars and a demonstration garden with plants applied in colouring
- Establishing and strengthening partnerships among various stakeholder groups – NGOs, cultural institutions and local authorities – through joint actions, trans-boundary roundtable and directory of NGOs, and creating a network of local authorities
- Direct measures to preserve protected – and often neglected – old trees of the region
- Reintroduction of indigenous plant species extinct due to overexploitation through the restoration of degraded landscapes, creating green areas along water courses and school yards, information materials and seminars to promote the sustainable use of plant species
- Support to revitalizing traditional cattle farming in West Stara Planina through research and analysis and the publishing of results

As the project advanced, the most active partners received continuous support through financing their initiatives. In Bulgaria five municipalities received support to develop regional ecotourism product and tourist information centres, while in Serbia three grants were financed for development of environmentally friendly agriculture.

Bringing communities together – “people-to-people approach”

Members of communities divided by country borders and sharing the same natural entity come together and celebrate... their region.

A separate set of activities has been developed to build relationships not only among institutions representing local communities, but community members themselves. Large scale promotion events have been dedicated to this purpose, bringing local people together. General values behind the project have been promoted and important steps have been made towards the development of a positive regional image. Building new relationships among societies divided by country borders and in the same time united by the same natural entity – river, lake or mountain – has been a central feature of all these initiatives. Many of them became a new tradition, and local or even national governments committed to invest efforts in sustaining them in the future.

EXAMPLE 9 – The Day of the “Hutovo Blato” Nature Park, Neretva Delta:

Hutovo Blato – “the mud of Hutovo” – is one of the largest and most preserved wetland complexes of the Neretva Delta, with several lakes and an extensive network of channels surrounded by reed beds, wet meadows and poplar-willow forests. It extends on almost 8000 hectares and is officially protected as a nature park. The management authority of the park is among the most important stakeholders and local beneficiaries of the project.

Following an initiative of the park management, since 1997 each year on the second Saturday of May local citizens and key stakeholders gather to celebrate the “Day of the Park”. By now the event became an important element in the life of local communities. It brings together over one hundred local stakeholders for programmes including cultural events, recreation activities, visits to the wetlands, lunch in nature and an introduction of recent project achievements.

Since the project started the “Day of the Park” turned to be a major public forum to

communicate about the project towards a wider group of local stakeholders and in a much more accentuated trans-boundary context. Besides local citizens the event involves local delegates in the state parliament, representatives of the canton's government and the federal government, ministry representatives from Croatia and Universities from both countries. The event is anticipated by an extraordinary meeting of the Neretva Delta Forum – an informal trans-boundary coordination body established by the project. Forum members discuss successes and failures of the project since the previous “Day of the Park” event, and they finish their meeting with an official opening of celebrations. The presentation of recent project achievements to the wider group of participants is also an integral element of the programme that follows the meeting of the forum.

EXAMPLE 10 – Annual trans-boundary crafts fair at Skadar/Shkodra Lake:

Following an initiative launched by the project, every year some fifty producers from Albania and Montenegro exhibit their hand crafts made of cotton, wood, reed, silver or leather, and home made food products (e.g. honey, vine, grape and dry forest fruits) at the annual crafts fair of Skadar/Shkodra Lake, organised in Shkodra, Albania. Producers come from settlements located all around the lake, and as a second important criterion, all products are made by using natural resources of the region.

The main message of the fair is that the lake and its natural resources – when used wisely – can make a real contribution to the living of rural settlements. As a more practical aspect, the fair provides opportunities for producers to improve the promotion and marketing of their products. Many stakeholders – including Ministries of Environment of Albania and Montenegro – consider the fair as an important element of the tourism offer of the region, with significant development potentials. The event attracts hundreds of people every year not only from the host countries, but also others, like Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Switzerland or Bosnia-Herzegovina. Additionally, it proves to be a good occasion for cross-border exchanges, and representatives of different stakeholders – local authorities, academic institutions, civil society, nature conservation organisations, and business – coming from both countries are also present.

EXAMPLE 11 – Joint annual festival in West Stara Planina:

One of the main goals of the project was to build a regional identity – with a great emphasis on surpassing natural and cultural values – through bringing people together to celebrate their common nature and culture. The project made use of many traditional events and created new opportunities to celebrate them jointly.

Joint festival program:

In the initial phase of the project a special annual festival was organized involving children, craftsmen and artists from the whole region. In the course of the project the festival evolved into a large program that lasts for the whole summer, includes major traditional celebrations of all municipalities in the region and is promoted jointly by them. Diversifying local celebrations of municipalities and giving them a more trans-boundary character was the expressed wish of the municipalities. The programme is organized every year by the Trans-boundary Working Group on Tourism, enjoys a great interest and appears to be an important tourism attraction of the region.

Crafts camps for children:

Preserving local crafts and traditions – which are very similar in the two countries – is one of the main priorities identified by local stakeholders. To this end two special camps were organized in Bulgaria and Serbia, bringing children from all municipalities together to learn about traditional carpet-weaving, pottery, traditional sings and folk dances. These camps

became popular among both children and their teachers. New trans-boundary partnerships have been established among schools in the region and as a follow-up new joint camps are planned depending on the success of their fundraise efforts.

Fair of Balkan Agro-biodiversity and Rural Heritage in Dimitrovgrad:

This initiative was initially supported by the project in order to promote the conservation of indigenous animal breeds and traditional rural livelihoods. As the years passed it became an internationally recognized celebration with ever increasing participation. It greatly raised the profile of the whole region as one with a unique rural heritage.

It is a common feature of these different events directly supported by the project that they managed to gather a large variety of community groups – artists, children, teachers, farmers, craftsmen, etc. – who realized they all belong to one neighbourhood. Through these the main goals of the project to promote nature and culture of West Stara Planina and bring the two nations together became their own internal values.

KEY OUTCOMES

1. Lines of communication among institutions and between countries have been restored:

Working relations between central governments and local authorities have been strengthened, and their joint decision making has been encouraged by engaging them in joint (trans-boundary) planning activities. Such forms of cooperation were nearly non-existent before.

For the first time after military conflicts local stakeholders from South Eastern European countries were brought together to define common objectives and actions for the future of their communities. Regional planning groups including representatives of national governments, authorities of protected areas, local authorities, NGOs and the private sector have been established.

After years of isolation operational contacts have been established between important national level players: between the Ministry of Environment in Albania and in the Republic of Montenegro, between the Federal Ministry of Environment of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Cantonal Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning in Mostar, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, between the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and the new democratic Government of the Republic of Serbia, and many other players. These working relations remained alive throughout the project, expanded in some cases, and got strengthened by official declarations in some others.

Substantial national and international attention has been mobilised, cross-border sites, mostly neglected before, were included in national strategic documents on the environment.

2. Local democracy has been strengthened through the introduction of participatory processes:

In overall the methodology of the project, its openness and bottom-up character introduced new participatory methods of work to local stakeholders and institutions. The project offered many opportunities for them to learn how cooperation with others working in the same local context can help them to deliver better results within their own field of work. Trainings and capacity building actions on public participation issues and participatory methods, like Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment strengthened these lessons with more theoretical background and knowledge.

3. Operational cross-border cooperation mechanisms have been established:

Trans-boundary forums that regularly brought together key stakeholders and experts, allowing them to follow developments within the project and the region, became an important institutional basis for future trans-boundary cooperation. As extensions of forums, topic oriented trans-boundary working groups have been established, targeting topics like sustainable tourism, agriculture or education. They deliver important contributions to the project and local societies on these topics.

4. Trans-boundary cooperation is supported by official cross-border agreements and the commitment of national and local governments:

The work of trans-boundary forums receives the important support of official trans-boundary cooperation agreements where local actors and national governments clearly engage to maintain and strengthen these newly established forms of work.

In the West Stara Planina site Bulgarian and Serbian local authorities signed their letter of intent on cross-border cooperation, which has been followed-up by the establishment of regional associations on both sides of the border. The two associations got together under the umbrella of the Euroregion – a formal cross-border body established according to rules of the Council of Europe. The “Euroregion” will play a key role in the development of the region and in facilitating cooperation on nature conservation, agriculture, tourism, culture and sport.

In order to strengthen cooperation concerning the management and protection of the Skadar/Shkodra Lake national Ministries of Environment in Albania and the Republic of Montenegro signed a memorandum of understanding, which has been followed by launching their joint initiative to celebrate the Day of the Lake every year through cross-border events.

The municipalities of Cetinje, Montenegro and Shkodra, Albania went through the process of developing their Local Environmental Action Plans, and as one of the outcomes, they issued their official statement that lays down the main principles for their cooperation.

5. The conservation of shared natural ecosystems benefits from new protected areas:

The project made substantial contributions to the designation of new protected areas, which would ensure that nature conservation efforts on one side of the border are complemented with similar ones on the other. Through this, important elements of a harmonised approach to the protection of shared ecosystems are getting prepared.

Following the decision of the National Assembly of Albania, shores of the Skadar/Shkodra Lake and adjacent wetland areas (23,027 ha) have been assigned the status of “managed nature reserve” and were included in the national system of protected areas. The same area received international recognition by receiving the status of wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention.

The process of designating the “West Balkan” Nature Park (162,000 ha) in Bulgaria reached an advanced stage of development as a result of the project. Information on biodiversity has been collected and analysed within the project, the proposal for designation has been submitted, full documentation has been developed, and as an important and officially required element in the process, public consultations have been organised. Feedbacks of local communities were supportive, which is partly the result of extensive promotion actions of the project.

Following the decision of the Croatian Government, stipulated also in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan of the country, the process of designating the Lower Neretva Nature Park (app. 12,000 ha) is about to start, by launching the preparation of a pre-feasibility study. The project supports the process with trans-boundary surveys and databases on various components of biodiversity – birds, butterflies, flora and vegetation.

6. Local communities benefit from concrete cross-border products that also bring new development alternatives:

Through the project joint studies and surveys have been carried out, addressing the management of shared natural resources. Joint bibliographies of relevant literature, biodiversity surveys and databases, analysis on different aspects of water management, the use of forests, environmental awareness of local communities or roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders help local planning and decision making in a trans-border context.

Cross-border products - e.g. educational manual for teachers in the Neretva Delta region, trans-boundary nature trail and network of tourism information centres in West Stara Planina, trans-boundary fair on traditional handicrafts in Skadar/Shkodra Lake - support the day-to-day work of certain stakeholder groups and offers concrete opportunities for development in areas like tourism or agriculture.

7. Local communities benefit from having their strategic development directions identified and assessed:

Defining common priorities, planning joint actions and developing a vision and objectives has been an overarching element of the whole project. Local stakeholders from all sites were engaged in such processes from the very beginning. Through the process they received support in elaborating their own visions and in defining directions in more concrete areas of work. Apart from participating at various planning meetings, and defining common priorities based on the information collected by them, stakeholders engaged in developing strategic concepts on areas like sustainable tourism and agriculture or environmental protection.

Halfway through the project a synthesis of existing knowledge has been prepared in all three sites, along with a diagnosis of main problems and opportunities and five year strategic plans.

Direct support to local initiatives of local stakeholders provided opportunities to test how activities identified together can work in real life situations.

8. Local stakeholders benefit from new knowledge and experience and lessons from other similar areas:

Key local stakeholders benefited through the project from a wide range of targeted capacity building actions - trainings, workshops and exchanges - on topics like objective oriented planning, Local Environmental Action Plans, Environmental Impact Assessment, Aarhus Convention, proposal writing and project cycle management, biological monitoring, habitat typology, education programmes and curriculum development, sustainable tourism and agriculture and sustainable hunting.

Stakeholders participated in several exchange programmes, and learned from the experiences of communities on the other side of the border and similar areas in countries of the region and beyond. Study visits have been organised to areas like the Ohrid Lake, between Macedonia and Albania, Peipsi Lake, between Estonia and Russia, the protected Lonjsko Polje wetland in Croatia, Constance Lake between Switzerland, Germany and Austria, Abruzzo National Park in Italy or the Delta of the river Po.

9. The management of shared natural resources is better ensured through improved multi-stakeholder dialogue and improved capacities of resource management bodies:

New methods for addressing issues related to the management of natural resources on the level of local communities have been introduced. Forum meetings, topic oriented working groups and workshops on concrete resource management aspects provided opportunities for stakeholders to elaborate their joint approach towards issues like fishing or hunting in protected areas, adopting environmentally friendly farming methods, or developing sustainable tourism etc.

In the framework of direct technical assistance management authorities, local authorities, agricultural bodies and schools received basic equipment for office operations and monitoring, education facilities and other tools necessary for performing their work.

Improved capacities of management authorities and benefits of a multi-stakeholder approach come together in concrete local initiatives where for example processes aiming at the designation of new protected areas, the development of common tourism products or safeguarding agro-biodiversity are implemented in a joint effort.

10. Countries reached further on their way towards stability and European integration:

The project - due to its scope and nature - aligned with the many other initiatives intending to help countries of South Eastern Europe to recover and achieve real progress on their way to economic and social stability, democracy and European integration. In this respect the project delivered a substantial contribution to the implementation of the Stability Pact and the Stabilisation and Association Process of the European Union.

PART IV – LESSONS

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED?

LESSON #1:

One can build joint responsibility for trans-boundary natural resources only by mobilising an as wide range of players as possible, which in return means that a flexible and process-oriented approach is required to maintain their active participation.

LESSON #2:

When complex issues like the management of shared natural resources are addressed, capacity building becomes a similarly complex and permanent process entailing a wide range of methods and targeting not only institutions, but also individuals and entire communities.

LESSON #3:

Constant trust and confidence in the fairness of dealings within the project – a precondition for maintaining an authentic trans-boundary dialogue on shared natural resources – requires transparency and openness, and a systematic approach to maintaining these.

LESSON #4:

Trans-boundary cooperation mechanisms can become sustainable on the long term, when they turn to be an internal value of local actors, local institutions are mandated through bottom-up processes to use these mechanisms, and local actors receive the possibility to address the future of their achievements and prepare for it.

LESSON #5:

Synergies among actions happening inside or outside the project or at different levels – local, national, international – are just as important as the actions themselves. However, exploring them needs an extra effort and a project team that is able to operate with the similar efficiency on the local, national and international level.

LESSON #6:

Raising issues concerning the management of shared natural resources can mobilise local authorities: give them new opportunities to learn, create new mandates to facilitate trans-boundary processes, and underline their importance concerning local developments.

LESSON #7:

When formerly separated communities are to (re)start their cooperation, addressing a neutral topic – like the joint management of shared natural resources – ensuring a neutral platform for discussions and providing an independent facilitator can become key preconditions for success.

BROAD-SCALE COOPERATION AND DIALOGUE

LESSON #1

One can build joint responsibility for trans-boundary natural resources only by mobilising an as wide range of players as possible, which in return means that a flexible and process-oriented approach is required to maintain their active participation.

If natural values and resources – like a river, a mountain or a lake – are considered common, responsibility for their availability for future generations has to be common as well. Resource management issues therefore need to go across the boundaries of decision making bodies and countries, and eventually reach all communities and

players concerned by the common resource. Following these principles entails that in such cases a large range of players needs to be mobilised, including not only management bodies, but also other representatives of local communities. The fact that in the specific case of this project natural ecosystems are shared by two countries just adds to the complexity of the issue.

The project sought to live up to these expectations and involved as many players as possible from the very beginning, placing cooperation and dialogue at a central place. Maintaining the trust and motivation of a wide range of players required that a lot of attention is paid to processes – not only topics – and flexibility is maintained, so that the project can respond to new needs and issues as they arise.

In the first years project activities focused on fostering a positive attitude and building trust among stakeholders. Relationships have been established and networks for communication and partnership have been created. A wide range of local actors took responsibility for objectives of the project through their participation at regional planning meetings, and engaging in open discussions over the project. Local and trans-boundary forums have been established. Through them local stakeholders could closely follow the implementation of the project, advise on adjustments and eventually participate in any debates concerning the management of natural resources or the development of their region. Trans-boundary Forum meetings also functioned as efficient cross-sectoral and cross-border coordination mechanisms. Large forums proved to be more effective in building trust and ensuring transparency at the beginning of the project or when broader issues are discussed. When more specific issues were addressed the involvement of topic oriented cross-border working groups or specific stakeholder networks were required.

Stakeholders received opportunities to define their vision and priorities for the development of their region. Gaps and inconsistencies in legislation and official procedures have been understood and common solutions were identified. Local priorities have been presented to local authorities, which responded supportively, and often raised these issues at the national level.

Engaging in the process also meant that local players could receive substantial support for their work. This would have not been possible otherwise as they had low capacities to exploit opportunities, and access national or international funding. This is clearly signalled by the fact that cross-border cooperation substantially developed in the context of small grants programmes, which revealed both the general weakness of local institutions and their responsiveness to training and capacity building opportunities offered.

Through this rather innovative approach local capacities for participatory decision-making have been built, and the feeling of ownership for the project and its results has been strengthened. This guarantees that current progress and the potential for future achievements are engraved in stakeholder networks, and will retain their energy even after the project ends.

EXAMPLE 12 – From “Get Everyone Involved Meetings” to the establishment of the Skadar/Shkodra Lake forum:

Introducing the project to an as wide range of local stakeholders as possible, and open the door to their contributions and involvement was the very first concrete activity of the project. Two large-scale events – so called Get Everyone Involved Meetings (GEIMs) were

organised during the last months of 2000. Besides presenting main objectives and the scope of the project, these events had the purpose to mobilise all actual and potential players interested in issues related to the lake. Invitations were sent to many different “environmental” addresses, and the meetings were announced also through national media, so that all stakeholders had the same chance to take an active part in it.

Many different topics relevant for the Lake were raised and discussed during. Local stakeholders were invited to propose concrete activities that might be included in the project action plan. Moreover, they identified national representatives to present and “defend” those activities at the project planning workshops that followed soon after.

Year by year, through implementation of many different activities, actors playing a key role concerning the protection and management of the lake were recognized in both countries. As a result large meetings, similar to the Get Everyone Involved Meetings organised at the beginning, were gradually substituted by a smaller but more permanent trans-boundary structure: the Skadar/Shkodra Lake Forum.

The Forum was established as an advisory body within the project, in order to improve the practice of transparent cooperation and dialogue with local stakeholders. Regular Forum meetings were organized on the national and cross-border level sharing all information relevant for the Lake among their members. The forum included a narrower “cross-section” of different stakeholder groups, involving representatives of Ministries of Environment of Albania and Montenegro, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, Universities and management authorities of protected areas. The Forum helped enhancing cooperation between relevant institutions and organizations within the countries. But more importantly, it provided neutral platform for the evolution of the cross-border dialogue.

CAPACITY BUILDING

LESSON #2

When complex issues like the management of shared natural resources are addressed, capacity building becomes a similarly complex and permanent process entailing a wide range of methods and targeting not only institutions, but also individuals and entire communities.

In an ideal situation a well established institution is led by a clear mission and mandate, has an organisational structure that fits to this, runs based on internal policies and procedures, develops plans for its operations on the short, mid and long term, is adequately equipped, has sufficient budget and uses realistic financial plans. This was rarely the case in the three project sites, where most institutions and actors dealing with local development or environmental matters are still evolving. Even when institutions were in place, their capacities – both human and financial – were not sufficient to carry out their work at required standards. For very clear reasons, coordination with other players, cooperation with counterparts across borders and participation in open planning processes that involve many stakeholders were not among the methodologies applied, although these are recognized to be the key to the sound management of resources.

In order to have real local partners for all those concepts envisioned by the project, capacity building had to become a permanent component. This was a well articulated need of the institutions involved, partly because they suffered from the lack of basic resources, and partly because the project brought in new methods of work, mostly unknown before.

However, capacity building was not restricted only to existing institutions or official bodies. It was more a process that involved the entire community at each of the sites. As a result of the broad participatory approach of the project all stakeholders were exposed to learning experiences and were “growing” together, as a community. The ability of all players to communicate and work in partnership has been nurtured while communication networks were developed and new relationships among organisations and individuals were established. New skills and knowledge appeared and stakeholders became more powerful in implementing their broader mandate.

In order to reach sustainable results, a combined approach was required, where capacity building applies a combination of tools. The process entailed several types of actions, summarised as follows:

- Absorption of a new knowledge and development of new skills through targeted trainings in various areas and for various stakeholder groups;
- Technical assistance to local agencies responsible for the management of protected areas and natural resources, carried out based on a careful assessment of needs, followed by trainings on new approaches to nature protection and resource management;
- Creating networks – by linking actors to each other and helping their regular exchanges – and strengthening them by establishing linkages with regional and international networks with a similar focus or functions.
- Providing opportunities for local stakeholders to apply new skills and knowledge, incorporate them into their every-day work practices, and expand their roles in the community by supporting local actors to develop and implement ideas in real-life situations.

EXAMPLE 13 – Improving local capacities for environmental education in the Neretva Delta:

The low awareness of citizens concerning the natural and cultural richness of the Neretva Delta region has been identified by local stakeholders as one of the main obstacles concerning the protection and sustainable management of shared natural resources. In response to this starting from January 2004 a specific set of activities have been implemented targeting schools – schoolchildren and their teachers. The work of the project took the form of an evolving process – called school networking – that was pursuing to increase the environmental awareness of schoolchildren, help teachers to adopt new and innovative methods in environmental education and exchanging experiences on possibilities for developing cooperative projects linking schools on the two sides of the border.

The process has been launched through a workshop of teachers and interested NGOs, where the trans-boundary forum of schools, an informal network of teachers and environmental education organisations, has been established. Members of this network proposed concrete activities and later they took an active role in the implementation of these. Main examples include the followings:

Trans-boundary environmental newsletter “*Ljepa nasa Hercegovina*” (Herzegovina, our beautiful home):

The newsletter is a cross-border product produced by schools involved in the project to promote a better understanding of pupils concerning the need for joint efforts for the protection of the region’s natural and cultural values. The magazine presents the works of teachers, scientists, pupils and NGO representatives and reaches a large audience, including schools, NGOs, local authorities, relevant Ministries, public enterprises, and others.

Environmental education package, including a teachers` manual and a video tape:

The education package – including a brochure and a video tape – has been developed as to support the work of teachers working in primary schools and kindergartens. It presents new methods of interactive learning and helps teachers to apply them according to specific local conditions. The pack has been introduced and distributed to schools and NGOs through a two-day workshop, and it has been also presented to relevant national institutions.

Education trail in the Hutovo Blato Nature Park:

In a joint effort of the NGO “Mocvara”, the authority of the Hutovo Blato Nature Park, the Ministry of Civil Engineering, Spatial Planning and Environment, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton and REC Site Coordinators a 110 metres long educational trail has been constructed to support outdoors nature education and diversify the tourism offer of the nature park. The trail provides basic information on the park and its biodiversity on seven information boards placed along the trail. It also contains a set of interactive elements helping children to learn about tree species, voices and other features of different animals, etc.

Interactive education modules in the Ornithological Museum of Metkovic:

As a tool for indoors nature education six different education modules have been developed. They include wooden puzzles about bird species of wetlands, special devices to learn about voices of wetlands – bird songs, voices of frogs and toads – and recognize the silhouettes of different bird species, a map of protected sites and a colourful presentation of protected areas in the Neretva Delta supported with pictures. These modules account for a great interest of visitors and are frequently used by classes.

Bird watching guide for children introducing common bird species of the Neretva Delta:

The guide introduces 33 common bird species of the Neretva Delta by presenting short stories related to them, supported with illustrations, a map and practical advices for bird watching. The booklet was developed for primary school children and to be applied as a practical tool for designing outdoors nature education activities.

EXAMPLE 14 – A systematic approach to capacity building at Skadar/Shkodra Lake:

Capacity building was one of the strongest components of the project at the Skadar/Shkodra Lake side. Recognizing the generally low capacities of many stakeholders, and in order to keep partners active throughout the whole process of implementation, a more systematic approach has been taken.

The capacity-building programme – as a “horizontal” element of the project – included three main components: (1) training workshops, (2) technical support to key management institutions, and (3) exchange of experiences with similar sites.

Numerous workshops were organized on various topics, recognized as necessary by local stakeholders. Some of them had a specific focus on cross-border cooperation. Examples include workshops on issues such as developing a joint vision, writing project proposals, project cycle management, objective-oriented planning, addressing environmental topics in media, challenges of cross-border monitoring, developing local environmental action plans and others. Many workshops were followed with activities that offered concrete opportunities to participants to apply the knowledge they gained, for example through implementing small projects or developing local environmental action plans.

Besides building human capacities, the project provided technical support to different institutions – protected areas` management authorities, environmental directorates, water management authorities, universities and schools. Assistance was always based on a careful planning and assessment of needs performed by a national expert. Examples include terrain vehicle for the national park’s ranger service, basic field equipment, computers and other relevant office equipment, etc.

In the framework of the third component – sharing experiences with other similar cross-order

sites - stakeholders from Skadar/Shkodra Lake were able to visit locations such as Ohrid Lake (between Albania and Macedonia), Peipsi/Chudskoe Lake (between Estonia and Russia), Lake Constance (among Switzerland, Germany and Austria), but also many other protected areas in Bulgaria, Italy, Croatia and other countries.

Through such a systematic approach the project did not only strengthen its own local partners. Stakeholders participating in these capacity building actions are now equipped with skills necessary for cooperation with other international organizations and potential donors.

TRANSPARENCY AND OPENNESS

LESSON #3

Constant trust and confidence in the fairness of dealings within the project - a precondition for maintaining an authentic trans-boundary dialogue on shared natural resources - requires transparency and openness, and a systematic approach to maintaining these.

Full transparency of project processes and openness towards any new stakeholders interested or new activities were fundamental elements of the overall approach throughout the whole process of planning and implementation. It was the only way to maintain the trust and full confidence of participants in the fairness of the process. In a sensitive situation like that of the three cross-border sites the slightest doubt concerning the fairness of the project would have had a disastrous impact. It could have completely blocked the process of getting trans-boundary communities formed and would have strengthened trans-boundary conflicts and alienation.

Therefore a whole set of mechanisms has been employed to ensure the transparency of the project from the very beginning. Besides regular open discussions with stakeholders, results of the project have been always widely distributed using mailing lists developed by site coordinators. Project newsletters, bulletins, websites, promotion materials and other means have been applied to reach not only stakeholders already involved but the wider public. Among others, this also resulted that the number groups expressing their interest in the project increased year by year, and any interested individual or organization could join at any time.

Cooperation with local media proved to be very important in communicating the project. Media presence has been ensured at every important event. In return local newspapers, TV and radio stations communicated key messages of the project, information on upcoming initiatives, new opportunities, findings, events, and others to their audience.

The transparent character of the project had an important secondary effect. The high level of publicity of all activities led to an increased feeling of responsibility of stakeholders participating in the project. The fact that the entire community is witnessing an event, and the awareness of local actors about this, made it more important for them to perform well.

Mechanisms and tools that secured the transparency and openness of the project could be summarised as follows:

- Exchange of information among different project sites: site coordinators exchanged weekly reports in order to inform each other, and the rest of the team on progress in the implementation of the project. A constant exchange of information concerning developments in the three sites has been maintained also through regular meetings of the team.
- Publicity of project activities and achievements: each site developed awareness programmes tailored to the local needs and culture. Mailing lists with over a hundred inserts have been maintained, including contacts of key organizations, state agencies, local authorities, local tourist businesses, NGOs and individuals. Fact sheets, newspaper articles, research results, announcements and other information were regularly disseminated. TV spots, presentations, campaigns and promotion materials were used to keep players informed.
- Communication with national institutions and other international players: national governments have been regularly informed through communication with project focal points at the Ministries of Environment. Besides, information on the project has been disseminated to other international organisations and donors, allowing them to join the process and add value through their own initiatives. Through the information provided the project supported initiatives like the European Green Belt of IUCN, the World Conservation Union, or the Dinaric Arc Initiative of UNESCO, WWF and UNDP.
- Regular reporting to the REReP Task Force: the project and its achievements have been presented to governments and international donors at Task Force Meetings of the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme.
- Proactive communication and openness of processes at the site level: the spirit of openness has been created through the very first site level actions and has been kept throughout the whole project. Working groups, meetings of stakeholders and trans-boundary forums all functioned following the principle of transparency.

SUSTAINABILITY AND LONG-LASTING IMPACTS

LESSON #4

Trans-boundary cooperation mechanisms can become sustainable on the long term, when they turn to be an internal value of local actors, local institutions are mandated through bottom-up processes to use these mechanisms, and local actors receive the possibility to address the future of their achievements and prepare for it.

While establishing relationships and building networks has been important at the beginning of the project, the longer term existence of these could not be imagined without turning them into real formal or informal institutions. On the short term, the project provided opportunities for players to come together, learn new methods of work and identify priorities to follow. However, the longer term goal behind all these has been to keep cooperation alive, and ensure that stakeholders adopt new methods not only when the project is active. This has been a great challenge, and success will be proven only a few years after the project finishes. However the main lesson is visible already now.

Perspectives for a long term commitment of local players to (trans-boundary) cooperation are the most promising in situations where newly launched cooperation

platforms, networks and groupings naturally grow into well established institutions, and those involved formally express their willingness to maintain cooperation and look for new opportunities. On the other hand such a process depends on many external factors, including the openness and positive attitude of national governments, interest of other international organisations and the availability of additional funding mechanisms that would support similar principles of work. However, all these cannot work without a strong bottom-up process, where local institutions and communities are strong enough to open towards new initiatives.

This project intended to create such local conditions by strengthening existing institutions, allowing new ones to establish, and promote the institutionalisation of the cooperation itself. The process could be summarised in a few bullet points as follows:

- Strengthening existing institutions and local authorities: training and education activities and direct support to concrete initiatives substantially strengthened the capacities of existing institutions. Their participation in gathering baseline information and carrying out studies supported them in enlarging their own databases and knowledge about the region.
- Supporting the creation of new institutions: in some of the cases direct support provided for strengthening local civil society resulted in the establishment of new local NGOs. Some of these became important players supported by local authorities and other funding agencies.
- Establishing links among institutions and organizations from different sectors: cooperation mechanisms established brought together organisations dealing with different aspects of resource management and local development. This often received the interest and support of relevant national level bodies – ministries responsible for tourism, agriculture, forestry, small- and medium size enterprises, etc.
- Establishing and strengthening cross-border cooperation mechanisms: trans-boundary forums and topic oriented working groups did not only serve as a good ground for discussions over project-related issues. In many cases ideas discussed were taken forward and new local or regional institutions emerged, which became the actual players in forming an official trans-boundary body or officially committing to trans-boundary cooperation.
- Seeking new funding: recent developments proved that all three project sites can count on the interest of other international donor agencies. It is important that local processes launched through this project are followed up and further strengthened by these. This requires additional efforts from local actors and their newly established networks.

Processes for creating long-lasting institutions for cross-border cooperation reached different stages of development in the three sites. Cross-border dialogue can be maintained only if it becomes an internal value of local communities, and real benefits are found. However, even if this happens, as it did within the project, the sustainability of newly created mechanisms has to be explicitly addressed. Additional efforts are needed to achieve that local actors acknowledge the need for such, and can prepare for a new situation that comes when the project ends.

EXAMPLE 15 – Long term achievements at Skadar/Shkodra Lake:

The Montenegrin part of Skadar/Shkodra Lake is under official protection since 1985 and

has an international status since 1995. Until the end of 2005 and beginning of 2006 this was not the case on the Albanian side. However, cooperation throughout the years of the project and the growing commitment of local and national players to the protection of the lake brought important results towards in this respect. Today these achievements are the cornerstone of trans-boundary efforts and serve with concrete safeguards concerning the protection of the lake.

On November 2, 2005, following an extensive consultation process of several months, carried out by the project team upon the request of the Albanian Ministry of Environment, the Albanian part of the Skadar/Shkodra Lake received official national-level protection. An area of 23,027 hectares has been designated and received the status of “managed nature reserve”.

Negotiations to place the Albanian side of the lake under official protection began shortly after the project has been started. The initial preparations in this respect have been directly supported by the project, including the preparation of GIS maps or developing the zoning of the future protected site. Once the draft documentation has been prepared by the Albanian Ministry of Environment the project team has been tasked with facilitating the public consultation process and reaching a consensus of local stakeholders. Starting in June and finishing in September (2005) the process included seven stakeholder meetings, which involved local authorities, communes concerned by the zoning of the future protected area, different institutions and important stakeholder groups, like fisherman or local communities living on the lakeshore. The process resulted in the official agreement of all relevant local authorities, which provided the green light to officially proclaim the site.

Parallel with the above process, efforts have been made to ensure the international recognition of the lake and its high nature conservation value. The process aiming to include the site on the List of Wetlands of International Importance under the “Ramsar” Convention on Wetlands included the preparation of necessary data sheets and providing information necessary for accepting the country’s application, and issuing the “Ramsar” Diploma. On February 2, 2006 this work has been successfully completed. The Diploma has been officially handed over to the country on a promotion event organised by the project on the International Day of Wetlands, on February 1, 2006.

Most of the work for the actual protection of the Skadar/Shkodra Lake is still ahead, and the persistent motivation of stakeholders will be required. However, the ground for joining efforts for this cause has been created: the whole lake with most adjacent wetlands is now legally protected by both Montenegro and Albania, and it also enjoys an international protection status.

EXAMPLE 16 - The evolution of trans-boundary cooperation processes in West Stara Planina:

For years the mountain - West Stara Planina - was separating people rather than uniting them. With the assistance of the project local stakeholders established contacts across the border and realized they have common traditions, problems and priorities. Now, after five years of dialogue, they have a common vision and commitment to fulfil it jointly.

The process implemented through the project proved to be successful. Partnerships across the border have been established and strengthened little by little, starting from the very grass-root level and reaching the highest political levels of the region’s governance. Before the intervention of the project there were only occasional bilateral contacts between municipalities. At the start in 2001-2002 the project sought to bring stakeholders together through wide scale meetings involving municipalities, teachers, farmers, small businesses, foresters, non-governmental organizations and media, so that contacts are established and joint problems are discussed. As the first contacts deepened, a process of setting joint priorities was initiated where local stakeholders identified main areas for trans-boundary

cooperation, namely: development of environmentally friendly tourism and agriculture, revitalization of local traditions and joint management of natural resources. In this period (2003-2004) joint action plans for cooperation were developed and trans-boundary working groups were formed. The following years (2005-2006) were marked with efforts of strengthening these first forms of institutionalized trans-boundary cooperation. Locally-defined priorities and partnerships were placed on the political agenda of mayors. They adopted them, and committed formally to the trans-boundary cooperation through signing the “Letter of Intent for Trans-boundary Cooperation on the Sustainable Development of West Stara Planina” on July 8, 2005 and establishing a joint organization - Euroregion Stara Planina under the framework of the Council of Europe - which would implement their joint vision. Their priorities were adopted also by the two governments and the newly established Euroregion was recognized by the Council of Europe.

By using such a bottom-up process in which trans-boundary dialogue started from the very local level and reached the government level, REC facilitated a sustainable and long-lasting cooperation and managed to raise the voice of local concerns and priorities and to bring them into the national and international arena.

EXPLORING SYNERGIES

LESSON #5

Synergies among actions happening inside or outside the project or at different levels - local, national, international - are just the same important as the actions themselves. However, exploring them needs an extra effort and a project team that is able to operate with the similar efficiency on the local, national and international level.

As the project worked with a wide range of activities and target groups and in trans-boundary regions targeted also by other projects, ensuring synergies internally and with other external initiatives has been an important element. The project had two opposite features which had to be addressed simultaneously throughout the whole process of implementation. On the one hand, one had to maintain the internal coherence of the project, and make sure that there is one strategic intervention behind all activities conducted at the different project sites. On the other hand, activities had to be planned and implemented according to local characteristics and needs.

Local working meetings and events - part of the overall planning and implementation process - ensured that different local level actions interfere and communicate with each other. This allowed for exploring synergies among actions taking place at the same time, and also to create a logical sequence of actions. Linkages among actions in different sites have been ensured by maintaining the regular communication among different communities and cross-border sites. Possibilities to link activities that focus on different topics have been also explored. Tourism development initiatives have been linked with agriculture, the production of local crafts or certain promotion events. This highlighted important opportunities for local economic revival.

Coordination with national and international level processes has been also sought for. It happened in all three sites that issues brought up on the local level attracted the attention of national actors, and in a few years of project implementation local level

priorities became important elements of national development agendas. Or national level development initiatives found their way to reach local communities in the sites.

Attaining the support of national governments was an important step also towards achieving the formal acceptance of the cross-border dialogue launched within the project.

Possible interrelations between local networks and project activities with relevant international networks and programmes have been also explored. Connections have been established with organisations like IUCN, UNESCO, WWF, the Transfrontier Protected Area network the Global lake network, and others. Through these, local stakeholders received direct access to international knowledge and experience, and became more responsible towards the project. Intentions to create conditions for attracting additional funding were another important aspect in networking with international organisations and the donor community. Several initiatives of organisations like the Department for Food, Rural Development and Agriculture, UK; the World Bank, or the European Commission have been recently launched in the project sites. These can deliver an important added value to the project and also benefit from its results.

The importance of linkages and synergies had important implications concerning the structure and functioning of the project team. Site coordinators – the “faces” of the project towards local communities – were not only implementing project activities, but they also had to become a real member within the network of local stakeholders. In the same time interactions among sites, with governments or other projects had to be maintained both on the local level, through site offices, and on the regional level through regional coordination.

A NEW ROLE FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

LESSON #6

Raising issues concerning the management of shared natural resources can mobilise local authorities: give them new opportunities to learn, create new mandates to facilitate trans-boundary processes, and underline their importance concerning local developments.

At a first approach addressing issues related to the management of natural resources seems to concern especially resource management bodies – water authorities, protected areas` authorities, forestry organisations or environmental inspectorates. Still, as it reveals from this project, these are also local development issues, and the sustainability of resource use has also social and economic implications.

The project intended to address nature conservation, the sustainable use of natural resources in a cross-border context, and the development of local communities at the same time. As a result, many sectors and types of institutions have been involved, but local authorities turned to be the most appropriate to take the role of facilitating processes of dialogue and cooperation. By addressing the protection of the common natural heritage with a recognised national and international value, the project made local

authorities to work on specific problems and underlined their responsibilities concerning the development of communities they represent.

Capacities of local authorities involved have been significantly strengthened, and their mandates have been enlarged through the project. They endorsed priorities defined by local stakeholders, engaged in organising forum meetings, and formally committed to regional and trans-boundary cooperation on issues like nature conservation, tourism, or agriculture. Partnerships have been established with local businesses, NGOs and among local authorities themselves. As one of the end-results the management of natural resources became the backbone for regional development, democracy and decentralisation.

It is not obvious to what extent environmental and socio-economic problems – i.e. the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, biodiversity loss, economic depression, depopulation – have been solved, but good practices developed can help in empowering local governments and raising their awareness on local problems.

EXAMPLE 17 – The evolution of the role of local authorities – West Stara Planina:

Local authorities were the main partner and actor in activities of the project carried out in West Stara Planina. Before the launch of the project they had only occasional contacts with adjoining municipalities or municipalities across the border. One of the major results of the project was that it served as a unifying factor, getting together local authorities not only in a trans-boundary context but in regional context as well. While in the beginning each municipality was acting on its own, pursuing its local priorities and development agendas, as a result of the project authorities started cooperating and formalized their cooperation in the establishment of two associations of municipalities – one on the Bulgarian and one on the Serbian side and the jointly established Euroregion Stara Planina. Municipalities are not expressing only the local concerns within their boundaries, but they become the drivers of regional development processes encompassing the whole West Stara Planina. They set joint priorities in which local concerns are incorporated into regional ones and they are getting involved in forming the regional policy for the West Stara Planina area – e.g. they are involved in the formulation of the operational programs for the European Commission's support programme focusing on trans-boundary cooperation between Bulgaria and Serbia.

The present REC project facilitated the establishment of a new role of West Stara Planina municipalities – a widened geographical approach to development and a widened scope of action and decision-making in the spheres of environmentally friendly tourism, agriculture and trans-boundary management of natural resources.

NEUTRALITY – A NEUTRAL PLATFORM FOR A NEUTRAL TOPIC

LESSON #7

When formerly separated communities are to (re)start their cooperation, addressing a neutral topic – like the joint management of shared natural resources –, ensuring a neutral platform for discussions and providing an independent facilitator can become key preconditions for

success.

It was a typical characteristic of the project that it was supposed to work in cross-border areas where due to various reasons (recent military conflicts, political tensions between countries or ethnic differences) borders represented strong barriers that isolated communities for years. It was therefore one of the explicit goals to re-establish the positive and productive relationship, where otherwise marginalised local communities can open up and link back to national and international networks. In the same time all the three areas are based on natural ecosystems shared by two countries and rich in biodiversity. They host large protected areas, which are included in national systems of conservation areas – as nature parks, national parks or special reserves – and are recognised as centres of biodiversity, wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, or UNESCO Biosphere reserves.

Given the politically neutral – still very positive – character of topics like nature and environment, issues concerning the management of shared natural resources proved to be very suitable for engaging local societies in joint discussions. As capacities for improving and harmonizing approaches for the management of shared ecosystems were limited, and communities were facing severe socio-economic problems, external support was welcomed and local stakeholders were opened to involve in trans-boundary processes.

The overall methodology of the project reflected these specific aspects. Professional groups engaged in assessing the state of biodiversity or different aspects of resource use in the context of the same natural entity. Local stakeholders developed a whole range of common trans-boundary products, organised joint events, and learned from each other in practical topics like agriculture, tourism, education or hunting. Once cooperation has been established, it became an important driving force, engaging also national governments and leading to official commitments concerning trans-boundary cooperation, joint development of cross-border areas or the joint protection of nature.

However, to maintain the trust of a wide array of players and keep processes running until they become close enough to sustainability proved to be a great challenge. Besides the neutrality of the topic, this required an independent facilitator who can serve as a neutral platform for trans-boundary discussions. The Regional Environmental Center (REC), as a non-partisan, non-advocacy, international organisation, has been playing this role. As one of the key players in the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme, the REC has a strong mandate to support countries of South Eastern Europe in solving environmental problems.

Due to its fifteen years of experience in the region, the strong commitment of the countries involved, and not at least, the regular support and guidance provided by the donor, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the REC managed to find the right tools to strengthen local stakeholders, support their joint work towards the development of their region and enhance the management of shared natural resources through trans-boundary cooperation.

PART V – NEXT STEPS

HOW ONE SHOULD CONTINUE?

Future actions and follow-up activities proposed for the final phase – to be implemented in 2007 and 2008 – and beyond focus on a few key directions. The long term sustainability of local processes initiated through the project and transferring the mandate of REC site offices to relevant local players is central element in these.

KEY DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE:

- Strengthening existing forms of trans-boundary cooperation, and assessing possibilities for establishing a long-lasting institutional ground for such in the future;
- Support the implementation of priorities identified by local stakeholders through larger scale local initiatives in the fields of tourism, agriculture, water management, environmental education and environmental investments;
- Supporting the development of harmonised management approaches for newly established protected areas;
- Transferring of the project to other potential cross-border sites.

Trans-boundary cooperation significantly evolved in the three project sites during the last six years. Today cross-border forums are fully accepted and ready to carry on the mandate to facilitate these, although the question of their future existence is still not yet fully answered. The level of development is different in the three sites. In case of West Stara Planina, where the institutionalisation of trans-boundary cooperation is more advanced, efforts will need to focus on building capacities of newly established cooperation institutions. The “Euroregion of Stara Planina” has been formally established to promote and facilitate trans-boundary cooperation, and funding is becoming available through the EU cross-border cooperation programme. However, modes of operation, internal structures and procedures still need to be worked out. The work in the coming years will therefore concentrate on ensuring that the Euroregion has sufficient mechanisms of operations and a network of trained staff to implement its mandate. This, among others, entails that the Euroregion is recognized within the European Union, corresponds to the European Commission criteria for Trans-boundary Entities, and can act as a partner in relevant EU financing mechanisms under its future trans-boundary policy as well as a partner in the implementation of other trans-boundary instruments. Already existing trans-boundary working groups of stakeholders should become the working bodies of the Euroregion, having their major functions to:

- Develop projects to implement the Letter of Intent signed by mayors of local municipalities;
- Manage joint databases related to tourism development, agriculture, and others;
- Manage the region’s joint website;
- Initiate and carry out activities on their topics – i.e. agriculture and tourism;
- Conduct joint events – e.g. festivals, crafts camp, agro-biodiversity fair, etc.; and
- Transfer the experience from projects implemented on the other side of the border.

In the Neretva Delta and Skadar/Shkodra Lake site it is a natural step to first explicitly address the long-term sustainability of forums and define the scope of their work outside of the project and beyond its timeframe. Realising that trans-boundary forums – as the mechanisms for stakeholder cooperation in a trans-boundary context – represent the core competence of the project, strengthening them, and engaging members in identifying viable options for the long-term functioning of the forums has been selected as one of the main directions of work. In these two sites the last two years of the project will therefore explicitly focus on these priorities, and it is expected that by the end of 2008 independent and self-sufficient new forums will be in place, with a clearly defined legal status. Forums could then operate for example as a commission, agency or committee, similar to river or lake basin management authorities widely known and practiced all over the world. There are several scenarios for organizing and structuring such a more official forum, which will be looked at carefully in following period.

In addition to trans-boundary cooperation, through the efforts of the project to defining joint local priorities and test them through small-scale actions a few very concrete topics crystallized, where targeted actions can actually deliver the benefits that made them to become priorities. However, follow-up steps would require a different approach, with more focused capacity building actions and more room for concrete investments. A few examples of these possible future actions are presented as follows:

NERETVA DELTA:

- Improving local capacities for waste water treatment through the introduction of Non-Conventional Technologies;
- Developing concrete sustainable tourism products – bird watching tourism, speleological tourism, Eco-villages – and light infrastructure for visitors` management;
- Direct support to sustainable and organic agriculture through developing a local eco-label for products small scale pilot actions on organic production;

SKADAR/SHKODRA LAKE:

- Developing sustainable tourism through capacity building actions, investments in light infrastructure for visitors management and systematic promotion actions;
- Developing a comprehensive Environmental Education Package for primary schools;
- Assistance to local authorities to identify environmental investment needs, prepare the documentation for concrete investments and seek funding for implementation;

WEST STARA PLANINA:

- Developing the “West Balkan ”trans-boundary trail and create a network of demonstration schemes and centres that link together tourism, agriculture and the production of crafts;
- Support the development of a regional brand for agricultural products, crafts and tourism services and building capacities of Tourism Information Centres in destination management, marketing and branding

The recent designation of the nature reserve on the Albanian side of Skadar/Shkodra Lake and the significant progress made concerning the establishment of the West

Balkan Nature Park in Bulgaria open new opportunities for strengthening joint nature conservation efforts. Possibilities for concrete actions include the establishment of trans-boundary working groups of management authorities, improving their capacities through transferring lessons from other countries and support their work on harmonising management plans of respective protected areas. To have a real trans-boundary protected area with a joint plan management could be considered as the final output of such a process.

Although concrete results concerning the designation of the Lower Neretva Nature Park in Croatia are not yet visible, in case the process advances, existing cross-border cooperation mechanisms might be utilised in the same manner.

Finally, lessons emerging from this project might very well be transferred and used in similar initiatives operating in other cross-border areas. Projects that deal with nature conservation and intend to employ a broader focus – a wider group of stakeholders, resource management aspects, cross-sectoral cooperation, and others – will also find conclusions of this project useful. Its overall approach to nature conservation is very much innovative and supportive towards an increased role of local communities in conservation efforts. It avoids adopting a narrow “reserve-approach” and it seeks to perceive nature in the context of sustainable development – as a value that needs protection, an important element of the quality of the living environment and also a resource that brings along real development opportunities.