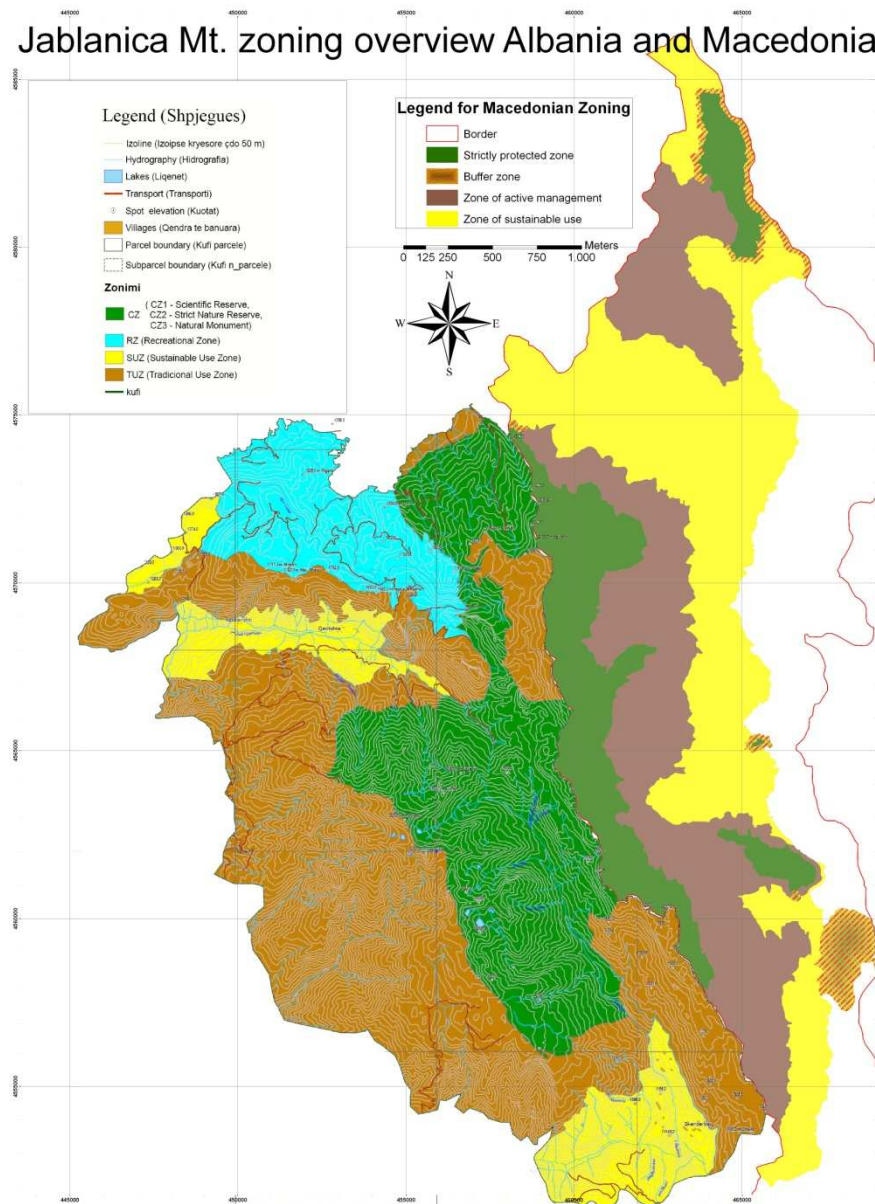


## Jablanica-Shebenik

Working towards a transboundary protected area for the Balkan lynx

Jablanica Mt. zoning overview Albania and Macedonia



## 1. Geography of the area

Jablanica and Shebenik Mountains are located north-west of Ohrid and Prespa Lakes. Jablanica Mountain indicates the southern border between Albania and Macedonia, while Shebenik Mountain is situated entirely in Albania and forms a parallel mountain range to Jablanica. On the Albanian side, Jablanica-Shebenik Mountains are dominated by high inclinations with elevations varying from 300 m to 2,262 m (Rreshpa-Shebeniku peak). The highest peak on the Macedonian side is Crn Kamen (2,257 m), while the most prominent summit is Strižek (2,233 m). Both Jablanica and Shebenik Mountains are known for a variety of glacial and periglacial relief forms, among them several cirques and glacial lakes. Considerable part of Jablanica is composed of limestone. The karstic origin shows in several springs, the most prominent one being Vevčani Springs in the village Vevčani in Macedonia. The most of the Shebenik Mt. ground is composed of serpentinite.

The slopes of Jablanica-Shebenik are dominated by forest. From 600 m to 1,300 m, the landscape is characterized by thermophile oak and Oriental hornbeam (*Carpinus orientalis*) forests, followed by broad-leaved mixed oak-hornbeam or oak forests. Pure beech forests cover the slopes between 1,300 m and 1,800 m. Subalpine and alpine grassland extends above the tree line, mainly used as high-mountain pastures (MES 2006, PPNEA 2006).

The local population of the Jablanica-Shebenik Mountains has been using natural resources (mainly wood) of the area for centuries. On the Macedonian side, the oak belt was mostly exploited. Today, the most preserved oak forests are found in stream gorges in the northern parts of Jablanica, owed to the harsh relief in this part. Also beech forests, except for the subalpine beech forest, are used for cutting. However, clear cutting is almost absent, so that the beech forest on the Macedonian side has retained its natural appearance. In former times, the grasslands above the tree line were used as summer pastures for sheep. Today though, with only few sheep farmers left, grazing of high mountain pastures has significantly decreased.

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Wetland Ezerca (Lakavica area, Macedonia) close to Albanian border. The wetland is overgrown with *Menianthes trifoliata*, a rare plant species in Macedonia.

Author: EuroNatur

On the Albanian side the picture is completely different. Isolation of the country during the communist time led to mismanagement and overexploitation of much of the natural resources of the country, including the forests of Jablanica-Shebenik. Only in higher elevations of the mountain range, stocks of intact beech forest were preserved as due to their vicinity to the border, only restricted access was permitted. At the beginning of the 1990s, in the transition phase after the political changes related to the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, it was again possible to enter the border areas. A second wave of overexploitation started with organized gangs illegally felling trees on a massive scale and benefitting from weak administration and a lack of control. This period decimated many up to then intact beech forests in Albania, some of them also on Shebenik. Similar to the Macedonian pastures, the subalpine and alpine pastures on the Albanian part of the mountain are used less than in former times, mainly due to the fact that livestock is preferably kept in close vicinity to the villages. This led to further exploitation of the oak belt, hindering natural forest regeneration. Although exploitation, in many cases illegal, of the beech forests continues, forests on

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Jablanica-Shebenik, compared to other mountainous regions in Albania, are well preserved. After the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, it became obvious that the border area is a green “line”. This resulted in the inclusion of the area in the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan of both Macedonia and Albania where it was mentioned the area is to become a national park by 2006 (Macedonia) (Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of the Republic of Macedonia 2003), and respectively part of the “Proposed Representative Network of Protected Areas” (Albania) (Bego and Koni 1999). In this context, the term “transboundary protected area” was mentioned. Additionally, Jablanica Mountain was indicated as a part of the Macedonian Green Belt in the Green Belt Map of Macedonia<sup>1</sup>. Considered as natural jewel of South-Eastern Europe, Jablanica-Shebenik massif is an integral part of the European Green Belt Initiative.

## 2. Milestones of historical development

Starting point for initiating transboundary cooperation in the Jablanica-Shebenik area was the assumption that the mountain ranges are habitat of the Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx martinoi*), a subspecies of the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*), with a population estimate of less than 100 individuals, the Balkan lynx is considered to be the most threatened autochthonous lynx population in Europe. The present distribution of the Balkan lynx is restricted to the south-western Balkans, mainly the border areas between Macedonia and Albania, spreading north into Montenegro and Kosovo. Here, the species has survived because the border region between former Yugoslavia and Albania was an area with limited access. Recognizing the need to protect the Balkan lynx, and biodiversity on Jablanica-Shebenik mountain in general, and paving the way for potential cross-border cooperation in considerable parts of Jablanica-Shebenik, a project “Balkan Green Belt as Ecological Corridor for Wolf, Bear and Lynx” was initiated in 2005. The project was financially supported by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation and jointly implemented by EuroNatur and its national partner organizations Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) and Preservation and Protection of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA). The partners gathered data on flora and fauna, as well as on other natural and cultural values of Jablanica-Shebenik Mountains, in order to prepare the technical documents necessary for proclaiming the protected areas. Maps with

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eea.europa.eu/soer/countries/mk/nature-protection-and-biodiversity-state>.



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suggestions on the zoning of future protected areas were elaborated in close discussion between the Albanian and Macedonian NGO partners in order to ensure that the zoning matches on both sides of the border. National authorities in the relevant ministries were regularly consulted, as well as local population. As the site was included in the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan of both Macedonia and Albania, political support for the project was assured.

Colorful aspects: *Lilium chalcedonicum* (orange) and *Lilium albanicum* (yellow) are typical plants for limestone. Author: MES

In 2006, EuroNatur, KORA, MES and PPNEA lobbied for a memorandum of understanding for the protection of the Balkan lynx to be signed between the ministries responsible for environment of Albania and Macedonia. The initiative failed due to lack of support on governmental level to bring the issue forward.

Shortly before the project ended in 2007, the technical documents and the zoning map were handed in to the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Water Administration in Albania. For Macedonia, the submission was postponed in order to further improve the technical documents.



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Within the frame of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme, jointly implemented by the same partners and Swiss large carnivore expert organization KORA, and financially supported by the Swiss MAVA Foundation for Nature Conservation, it was possible to continue the works on Jablanica-Shebenik. The report on the natural values of Jablanica Mountain was improved, and lobby work on national and local levels was increased both in Albania and in Macedonia. Finally, in May 2008, the first success was achieved as the Albanian Government proclaimed the Shebenik-Jablanica National Park, covering an area of 340 km<sup>2</sup>. Although the reports for the Macedonian side were improved and officially submitted in the second half of 2009 and regular discussions with the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning took place during which the high interest and support on behalf of the Ministry was signaled, the proclamation of the national park has not yet been achieved and the proposal is still pending.

The only way to create a coherent protected area with a complementary zoning system, taking into account the natural values of the mountain system and the needs of the species inhabiting the area rather than political borders, is to establish transboundary cooperation. This initiative is strongly supported by local NGOs (MES, PPNEA), and the internationally active foundation for nature conservation EuroNatur (based in Germany), who continue to foster good cooperation emerged during the joint work in Jablanica-Shebenik.



### 3. Benefits and challenges

Until now, transboundary cooperation in Jablanica-Shebenik area is functioning only at non-governmental level and by informal events. Nevertheless, the vision of all partners involved in the work in Jablanica-Shebenik is that in the future, the whole mountain range will be protected, independently of state borders, creating a coherent protected area with a size of approximately 500 km<sup>2</sup>. With close cooperation during the development of the zoning concepts for the national protected areas, an important basis to turn that vision into reality was created. During the intensive work in the area, good contacts with local population were made on the Albanian and the Macedonian side and the support of relevant stakeholder on local level was assured – also because they see the economic opportunities arising from such a transboundary protected area in the future, e.g. through nature based tourism. Currently though, there are still some obstacles to overcome until a transboundary protected area can become a source of income for the local population. Due to the fact that only on the Albanian side a national park was proclaimed so far, while on the Macedonian side, the proclamation is still pending, the biggest challenge at the moment is to foster the proclamation of a national park on the Macedonian side. Once both national parks are established the next challenge will be to develop working administrative entities in both countries, which will be important for turning the vision of a transboundary protected area Jablanica-Shebenik into reality.

Albanian, Macedonian partners and EuroNatur elaborated the “Balkan Lynx Conservation Strategy” under the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme-Phase I in June 2008. The Strategy calls for the establishment of protected areas in accordance with the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans, Emerald Network, Natura 2000 and the Green Belt Initiative, with special emphasis on the needs of a viable Balkan lynx metapopulation (Balkan Lynx Strategic Group 2008). The establishment of Jablanica National Park in Macedonia is noted as an important objective, while Shebenik-Jablanica National Park designation was not included as it had been proclaimed shortly before the elaboration of the Strategy. The Strategy served as basis for the development of National Action Plans. However, the Strategy and National Action Plans have not yet been endorsed by the respective governmental authorities, but lobby work from NGOs will continue.

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Against this backdrop, one of the most important aspects is to work with the local population on both sides of the border in order to ensure continuous support for the transboundary protection of the mountain range. This includes also the implementation of small scale transboundary projects. For example, EuroNatur, MES and PPNEA jointly worked on the establishment of a transboundary hiking trail, which stretches across both sides of Jablanica-Shebenik Mountains and meets at several peaks of the transboundary mountain ridge. Peak Krstec is considered to be the main traverse, as here a transboundary trail which was used in the past already existed. The locals were involved in the works related to clearing and marking the trails, or putting up sign posts and information panels. One-day visit of Mayors and representatives from the forestry authorities from Shebenik-Jablanica villages in Albania to Jablanica Mountain was organized, where they met their counterparts from Macedonia. This “exchange visit” created the basis for discussions, e.g. about the future development of the mountain range.



Sign posts indicate the course of the transboundary hiking trail (here: Shebenik Mountain, Albania). Author: PPNEA

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MES, PPNEA and EuroNatur will continue to lobby for the proclamation of a national park in Macedonia, as well as for the establishment of a working administrative structure for the national park in Albania. Another important aspect within the scope of work of the project partners is to contribute to the development of management plans with matching objectives for both national protected areas in order to create a basis for a future transboundary protected area management.

## 4. Lessons learnt and future prospects

In order to avoid difficulties in a later stage, the zoning concept was developed jointly for the Macedonian and the Albanian future national park. The area benefitted from a productive participative approach with local population who were consulted about their opinion on the issue of borders and the zoning of the future national park. The process created trust between the different players as well as acceptance on behalf of the locals towards the proclamation of protected areas. This becomes particularly important considering that on the Macedonian side there is no national park yet and taking into account the lack of administrative structures on the Albanian side. Consequently, currently the protection of Jablanica-Shebenik mountain range more or less solely relies on the goodwill of the local population until the respective structures are created.

One reason for choosing Jablanica-Shebenik to work towards a transboundary protected area was the assumption that the effort would be strongly supported by the governmental authorities as such was mentioned in the national Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans. In general, this assumption worked well, but one lesson that had to be learnt while the project progressed is that interests can change, and consequently, the focus of governments can change as well. Based on this lesson, it is even more important to continue working in the respective target area in order not to lose credibility and acceptance among locals – despite the lack of political support.

The proclamation of a protected area is not necessarily accompanied by the establishment of a respective authority. Consequently, lobbying at the national level, and including local people, needs to be continued.

Despite several obstacles on the way towards a transboundary protected area Jablanica-Shebenik as part of the Balkan Green Belt, the activities



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implemented so far can be considered as very successful, especially considering the comparably short time that has passed since the very first activities started in 2005. Based on the successes achieved so far, all partners involved will continue their joint effort in order to turn the vision of a transboundary protected area Jablanica-Shebenik into reality one day.

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