



United against hopelessness

An unusual nature conservation story from the karst landscape of Bosnia-Herzegovina

“We used to be the weird biologists walking around with our binoculars. Now people call us and ask for advice. They trust us.”

Biljana Topić, Naše Ptice

“What? We shall cease to count the birds?” Biljana and Goran Topić are shocked. They are biologists with their body and soul. But EuroNatur project manager Sandra Wigger stands firm: “We have to change our strategy,” she says. That was a good two years ago. The national protection of the karst plains (see Box 1) Livanjsko Polje and Duvanjsko Polje was still far away, although field data on flora and fauna had been completed, the outstanding ecological value had been proven and all decision-making bodies had been informed. However, the Bosnian government showed no interest in preserving these valuable natural and cultural landscapes and blocked the process. This is still the case today, but there's one big difference: Biljana, Goran, Sandra and their many fellow conservationists are hopeful that they will be able to save the karst poljes from destruction.

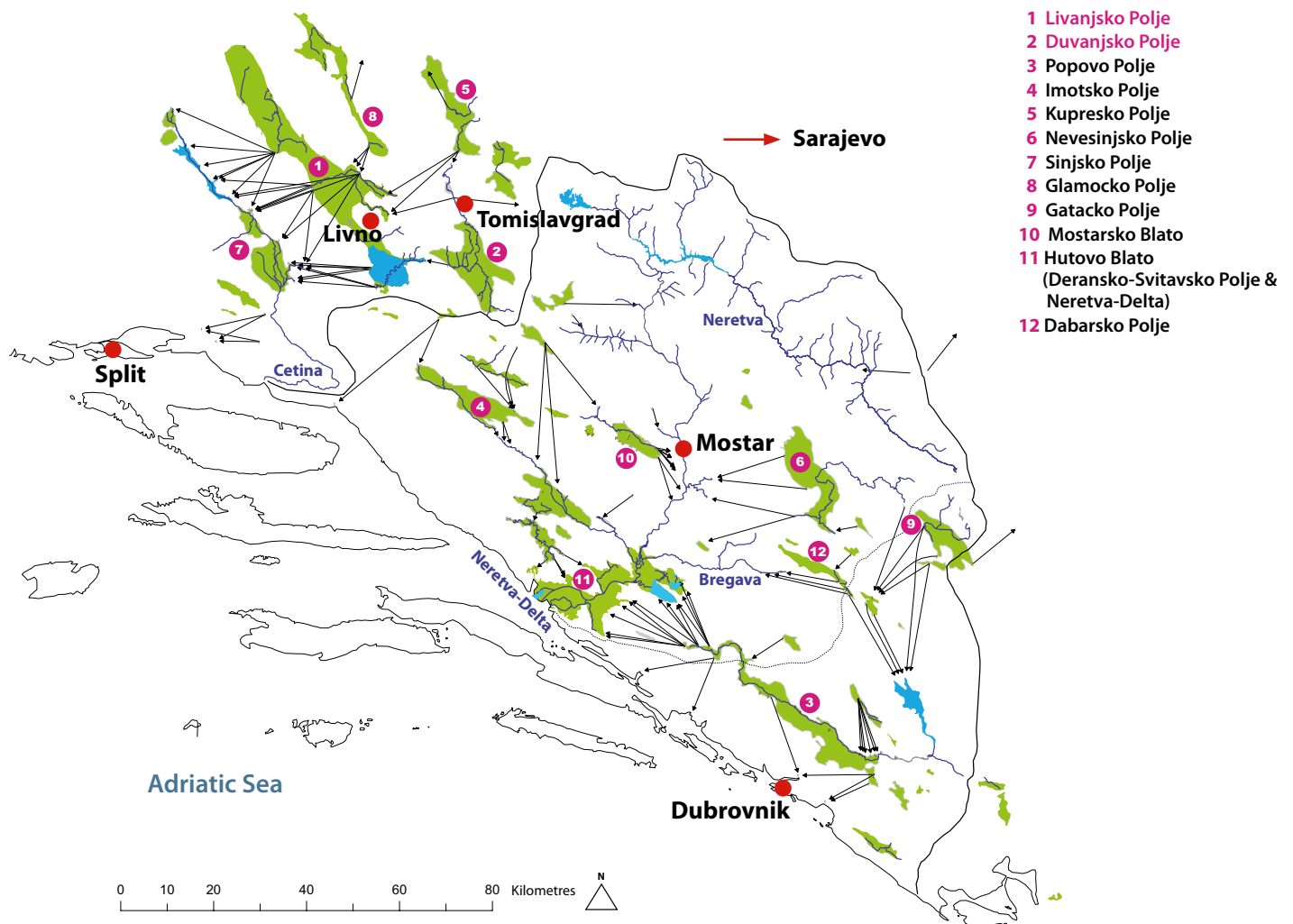
Instead of expecting the government to change mind, they started a civil society initiative that is increasingly gaining momentum. Slowly but surely, a change for the better is emerging in this region between Sarajevo and Split, which has been suffering from images of violence and pain ever since the Bosnian war. “This is the most important job we have ever done. We have become more complete environmentalists and conservationists by working with the local people. We support them to build a livelihood and to stay in their home region. And we help them to do business without harming their natural environment, and to shape their own future,” they say.

The most important thing: dialogue

Biljana and Goran wilfully decided to work in Livanjsko Polje – in the middle of nowhere, a region that most young people left because it offered them little outlook for their lives. For Biljana and Goran however, the opposite is true.

“When we started talking to people, we quickly realised that the war had heavily shaped their way of living and thinking. They are mainly concerned with surviving somehow. If this necessitates cutting down the forest, they do it. If it is easier for them to burn the grass than to mow it, they do it,” Biljana explains. Bitterness and resignation took up much room.

The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina would prefer to see the region depopulated so that it could exploit all resources without hindrance. In the absence of people who fight back, they would sell the water, the woods, the peat, the coal and everything else, Biljana is convinced. “We want to avert this destructive form of development and establish a sustainable livelihood,” Goran adds. “It is important for us to find an approach in cooperation with the local population and that's quite noticeable to them. There's finally someone caring about their future and taking their needs seriously.”



A mysterious and sensitive system of underground inflows and outflows connects the karst poljes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (the arrows mark the groundwater flows). Depending on how much precipitation falls, these natural basins fill and empty. Karst polje regions play an important role in flood protection. Livanjsko Polje (picture left) is considered the largest karst field in the world.

Ruined houses, distrustful people

In the beginning, it was quite different, as Biljana and Goran still remember with a queasy feeling. It was not long ago that sceptical looks followed their steps, especially in the villages north of Livanjsko Polje. "Whenever we met someone, we tried to talk about our ideas for the region. But most of the time they just replied: 'OK, but now I have to take care of my sheep.' That was quite frustrating," says Biljana. The first ray of hope was the mathematics teacher Nataša Bojinović. She was open-minded from the beginning and wanted to help Biljana and Goran find allies. But it was not easy. "Nataša invited all her relatives and neighbours to an information event. About ten people came, but they were all sceptical." Biljana fights back her tears before continuing. "Then all of a sudden a woman yelled at us, why we wouldn't remove the mines instead of telling stories here? I had come to see how we could help and then met so much repudiation."



Marija and Anto have a dream

"Our country is still associated with the war 30 years ago. When someone hears the name Bosnia-Herzegovina, thoughts immediately come to mind of all the bad things that happened. We want to change that. We hope that someone who hears the name of our city Livno will think of the largest karst polje in the world, of the wild horses, our beautiful rivers and home-made food. We want people to have positive associations to our region."

Marija und Anto Perković, stur.ba canoe safaris



Freely grazing cows and flocks of birds. The karst poljes of Bosnia and Herzegovina offer oases of peace, space and diversity.

Photos: Martin Schneider - Jacoby - Kupresko Polje, stur.ba

„Livanjsko Polje and Sturba are heaven on earth. We want to make local people aware of this.“

Anto Perković, stur.ba canoe safaris and bird watching

Photos: stur.ba, Farm Podhum Livno, Gusto Magla



The small-scale projects bring life back to the poljes. Picture left: After an eventful day on Sturba river, Marija and Anto Perković have pulled their canoes ashore. Center image: Old livestock breeds like these Salers cattle are back on the pastures as landscape keepers. Picture right: On guided tours, guests can enjoy the beauty of the Poljes by bicycle and bring income to this remote region.

You have done so much for our community!

“The positive turnaround came when we started supporting small-scale agricultural and tourism projects (see Box 2). Thanks to this practical support, the local population gained confidence,” Goran explains. Some even ventured on a study trip to Lonjsko Polje Nature Park and Gajna Protected Landscape in Croatia, as well as Notranjska Regional Park in Slovenia, to get inspiration for sustainable regional development. Others regularly attend the forums organised by EuroNatur, Naše Ptice and Naša Baština to network with farmers and tourism entrepreneurs from the area. Nataša Bojinović, too, is still in contact with Biljana and Goran. With the help of financial grants from the project, she now produces traditional handicrafts and passes on this art to others. Recently, the newly appointed mayor called the conservationists and said: “You have done so much for my community! Now I am in a position to help you with your project.” It’s moments like this that make up for all the hardships.

And suddenly the idea of canoe safaris was on the table

The lives of Marija and Anto Perković also changed when they met Biljana and Goran. The teacher couple had been thinking about leaving Livanjsko Polje and migrating abroad. Then they attended an information event organised by Naše Ptice, which was about nature tourism. “We have been here all our lives, but we had no idea how rich our region’s bird fauna actually is. We also didn’t know that there were so many people interested in bird watching. And suddenly our idea of canoe safaris was back on the table,” the two remember.

Anto was born and raised near the Sturba river. When he grew up, he always dreamed of once having a real canoe. “There was nothing like canoe safaris in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina yet, so we had to venture something new. If we hadn’t been able to

count on the financial support and helpful advice from EuroNatur and Naše Ptice, it would have taken us much longer to realise our project and maybe we would have given up. But in the end, we made it!” Since May 2020, the teacher couple has been offering summer canoe safaris with their small company stur.ba. Already in the first season, they had several hundred participants, most of them from the region, some living less than two kilometres away. Marija and Anto frequently heard exclamations like: “It’s so great here, we had no idea!” But their goals reach far beyond their own happiness. “We want to show the region’s potentials and get people to stay. We say: If we have managed to do this, you can set up something new, too.”

Leaving resignation, entering a self-determined life

Slowly but surely, a spirit of optimism is replacing the resignation of the people living in Livanjsko Polje and Duvanjsko Polje. Sandra Wigger’s confidence is growing, too: “The larger the number of people who can make a living from nature tourism or agriculture, the harder it will be for the government to exploit the poljes’ natural and cultural landscape. People no longer fall for empty promises of a better life. Instead, they say: I already have a good job.” Sandra Wigger is quite aware of the danger that nature tourism could become a new threat to nature, but does not consider it to be too menacing. After all, it is not about mass tourism, but about a small but fine offer for nature enthusiasts. “If you want people to stay in the region, you have to help them find sources of income,” Goran agrees. That is his dream – a dream that is about to come true.

Text: Katharina Grund; Translation: Clemens Purtscher

Karst poljes? Never heard before!

With its about 460 square kilometres, Livanjsko Polje is considered the largest temporarily water-filled karst field in the world. Around 265 bird species can be seen there and during spring migration an estimated 100,000 water birds rest in the wetland. The karst poljes in Bosnia and Herzegovina are natural and cultural landscapes of national and international significance. Often surrounded by rugged mountains, the plains form where calcareous rock is dissolved at the edge of a depression. For thousands of years, they were used for pasture and agriculture. Since there are no run-offs at the surface, they fluctuate between being flooded over large areas or largely falling dry, depending on precipitation and groundwater levels. This dynamic provides a mosaic of habitats for an extraordinary biodiversity. But these natural gems are threatened by drainage, hydropower development, peat extraction and clearcutting. The abandonment of traditional land use is a problem, too, as the valuable open landscape gets overgrown and loses much of its biodiversity.



About the project

Together with its partner organisations Naše Ptice, Naša Baština and Dinarica, EuroNatur is working to preserve the karst poljes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main focus is on Livanjsko Polje and Duvanjsko Polje. Almost 20 projects by local stakeholders in the fields of agriculture and tourism have already been implemented with financial support and advice from EuroNatur and Naše Ptice – ranging from building traditional guest accommodation, revitalising abandoned pastures and producing regional food, to offering canoe safaris for nature enthusiasts. More than half of the beneficiaries are younger than 40 years. You can find a short video on the internet at enatur.org/1024



Biljana, Goran & the karst poljes: a love story

It was a day in spring when Biljana began to understand Goran's love for the poljes. The karst field Livanjsko Polje had turned into a huge lake. Covered in snow, the surrounding mountains were reflected in the water along with flooded trees. Adding to the sound of breaking ice, a roar captured Biljana's attention. For the first time in her life, she heard what it sounded like when a lake sinks through swallow holes in the karstic bedrock. "Spectacular" was the word most often used by Goran when speaking of the poljes. Now she knew why. For Goran himself, it had been love at first sight: "Rare bird species such as corncrakes, harriers, whinchats are abundant here. This diversity time and again blows my mind," says Goran. Today, the couple works for Naše Ptice and together they fight for the protection of these breath-taking natural and cultural landscapes.



Photos Goran Topić – Livanjsko Polje; Portrait: Manuel Schweizer