Belasitsa Beyond Borders
Transboundary Cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt
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Imprint:
Published by: EuroNatur Foundation, Radolfzell, Germany and Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF) - Belasitsa branch
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Layout by: Kerstin Sauer, EuroNatur Service GmbH

Available from: EuroNatur Foundation
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The brochure was elaborated in the frame of the project “Belasitsa Beyond Borders – Transboundary Cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt”, which was jointly implemented by Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation – Branch Belasitsa (Bulgaria), EuroNatur Foundation (Germany), Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate at the Executive Forest Agency (Bulgaria), Management Authority of Lake Kerkini (Greece) and Environmental Association Planetum (FYR Macedonia). The project was co-financed by the German Federal Environmental Foundation (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt).
Summary

Belasitsa Mountain range is located in the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula shared by three countries – Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia. The special geographic location between the Mediterranean and the Continental climate zones, the steep slopes and high peaks, centuries-old forests and small but beautiful rivers make Belasitsa a hot spot of biodiversity in the heart of the Balkans. The natural value of Belasitsa Mountain is well recognized and protected by the Lake Kerkini National Park (in Greece) and the Belasitsa Nature Park (in Bulgaria) as well as the Pan-European Ecological Network Natura 2000.
Belasitsa Mountain as part of the European Green Belt

Belasitsa, located in the border triangle of Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia, marks the end of the European Green Belt. Along the former line of the Iron Curtain, the Green Belt spans 24 countries, running for about 12,500 km from the northern tip of Europe through Central Europe and on to the Black, Ionian and Adriatic Seas.

The course followed by the Green Belt is a legacy of history. For decades this line was a symbol for the political and ideological divisions between the European powers. Most of the areas along the Green Belt long remained a forbidden zone where no activity was allowed. The “Iron Curtain” was one of the most divisive barriers in Europe. The only positive outcome of this strongly guarded borderline has been the preservation of some of the most important remaining habitats for biodiversity from almost all of Europe’s biogeographical regions.

The route of the Green Belt reveals highly impressive, sensitive landscapes, and is home to the natural flora and fauna typical of the regions along its course. As it passes through many different regions and countries, the Green Belt presents itself in many different ways resulting from the various countries’ immense political, biological and socio-economic diversity.

The southernmost part of the European Green Belt, known as the Balkan Green Belt, hosts a hot spot of biodiversity and endemism. Predominantly located in the mountain ranges of the Balkan Peninsula, it forms an extremely heterogeneous mosaic of natural landscapes, including pristine alpine ecosystems, forests and steppe habitats, as well as lakes and coastal zones. The region also includes extraordinary cultural landscapes that are home to a multitude of threatened plant and animal species.

Just like most of the Green Belt, the Balkan Green Belt follows a general north-south direction. This tendency ends all of a sudden at the Belasitsa Mountain range, where the Green Belt forks, running to the West towards the Adriatic Sea and to the East towards the Black Sea.

For further information, please see www.europeangreenbelt.org

Vision for the European Green Belt

“The European Green Belt, our shared natural heritage along the line of the former Iron Curtain, is to be conserved and restored as an ecological network connecting high-value natural and cultural landscapes whilst respecting the economic, social and cultural needs of local communities.”
The cultural and historical heritage of Belasitsa is as matchless as that of its nature: remains of prehistoric settlements, ruins from Roman times and medieval fortresses are witnesses of a long and rich history which continues to live in traditional festivals, some of which are already held for centuries.

Its unique location at the very end of the Balkan, respectively European, Green Belt, its splendid nature as well as its rich cultural and historic heritage inspired several project partners from Bulgaria, Greece, FYR Macedonia and Germany to implement the project “Belasitsa Beyond Borders – Transboundary Cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt”.

The project was conducted from January 2013 to September 2016 by Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation – Branch Belasitsa (Bulgaria), EuroNatur Foundation (Germany), Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate at the Executive Forest Agency (Bulgaria), Management Authority of Lake Kerkini (Greece) and Environmental Association Planetum (FYR Macedonia) and financially supported by German Federal Environmental Foundation (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt, DBU). It aimed on contributing to the joint long-term conservation and sustainable development of Belasitsa Mountain, promoted the unique biodiversity of Belasitsa and fostered the transboundary cooperation between the three neighboring countries - Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia.

Selected project activities together with the most relevant results from each activity are described in the following pages.
International Youth Camps

Three International Youth Camps were organized as part of the project, one in each country. A total of 42 participants coming from Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia took part in the events.

The camps were structured into a theoretical part including lectures on nature conservation and sustainable tourism as well as an outdoor part consisting of different workshops and field trips. The camps’ participants met the major actors working in the field of the nature conservation in the international Belasitsa region and got to know their everyday work as well as the challenges they are facing.

Together the participants developed ideas for sustainable development in the region.

The best about the camp was meeting new friends and we learned a lot about the biodiversity of Belasitsa.

I will take home new friendships, new ideas for saving the nature, and a better understanding for the importance of the natural beauties of Belasitsa.

I found many new and beautiful places that I didn’t suspect to exist.

The sightseeing was awesome and now I love Belasitsa even more than before.

The beauty of Belasitsa is inspiration for me to love more the nature and take care about it.

I will tell people to save and preserve the environment, because we have one planet and we should preserve it.
Student exchange

A student exchange trip to the Belasitsa Mountains was organized in November 2013 for 19 students from all three countries. The four day trip took place in Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia.

As a result of the exchange the students learned about the natural and cultural values as well as the tourism opportunities of the trans-border area and got an insight into the administration responsibilities of Belasitsa Nature Park (Bulgaria) and Lake Kerkini National Park (Greece). Thereby the participants got to know the potential of the Belasitsa region as a nature-based tourism destination.

As a result from the student exchange, four participants decided to elaborate their diploma thesis on a subject related to Belasitsa. One student chose to work on a cultural topic, three others chose topics related to nature. The students were supported with small grants provided through the project.
Training of Nature Guides

In 2014, 16 local people from all three countries were trained in nature interpretation and visitor guiding.

The training course included a theoretical part on interpretation, nature protection, history and culture of the Belasitsa region and a practical part on leading visitor groups along one of the interpretative tourist trails on Belasitsa Mountain - “The Life of the Chestnut”. At the end of the training some of the newly trained nature guides were involved in other project activities. A special section regarding guiding services was developed on the web-portal of Belasitsa. Short profiles and contact details of the nature guides can be found here:

http://belasitsa.com/index.php?id=723&L=1
Trainings and exchanges for tourist service providers

During the project implementation there were six one-day trainings and three exchange trips for tourist services providers. All these events played a vital role in bringing people together and allowing them to share experience and good practices. All participants got the chance to understand and personally experience the situation in the two neighboring countries. For many these forums were the first occasion in which the people involved in tourism business from the international Belasitsa region met, established new contacts and exchanged ideas about the tourism development in the trans-border area. Thus a feeling of belonging to a bigger common region was created. The tourist services providers developed tourist product ideas which may serve as a basis for future cooperation and common development of the international Belasitsa region.
Winter Belasitsa

During the project implementation an attractive hiking initiative called ‘Winter Belasitsa’ was developed and implemented three times. The trek will continue to take place once a year during February in Bulgaria. It includes winter hiking and snowshoeing along the beautiful snow-covered slopes of the mountain to the highest peaks together with a visit to the Shy Waterfall and real taste of the local cuisine, wine and culture. Current information about the next Winter Belasitsa hike can be found on the web-portal:

www.belasitsa.com
Nature Information Trail

As a result of the project implementation a nature information trail was elaborated in FYR Macedonia. The trail connects two of the charming villages at the foothills of the mountain leading the visitor past the impressive Roman Thermae in Bansko to Gabrovo Waterfall. The facility offers not only a pleasant forest walk but abundant and intriguing information regarding the rich history and nature of the area. You can visit the trail using one of the two starting points:

- Bansko, Roman Thermae
- Gabrovo, Gabrovo Waterfall
A photo contest entitled “The Incredible Belasitsa” was organized during the project implementation. More than 250 pictures showing the best of the mountain in Greece, Bulgaria and FYR Macedonia were collected. The 45 best photos were selected and arranged into a beautiful traveling exhibition. From 2013 to 2015 “The Incredible Belasitsa” Photo Exhibition visited nine different locations in the three countries and attracted more than 14,000 visitors turning into one of the most successful promotion tools for the region.
Catalogue of ecotourism services and products

A joint catalogue of ecotourism services and products was elaborated. The publication contains a total of 39 sites and services, presenting some of the best nature oriented examples of tourist offers in the international Belasitsa region. Each country has its own chapter consisting of service descriptions, including type, location, capacity and contact details, as well as additional tourist attractions in the vicinity, specific services and product offers.

The catalogue can be found here: www.belasitsa.com/fileadmin/content/documents/tourism/Catalogue_of_ecotourism_Belasitsa_Region_s.pdf

Additionally, the catalogue is available for visitors at the Information Center of Belasitsa Nature Park, Bulgaria and the Information Center of Lake Kerkini National Park, Greece. For address details, please see end of the brochure.
Important contacts:

**EuroNatur Foundation (European Nature Heritage Fund)**
Establishment: 1987

EuroNatur works for the protection of large-scale landscapes and the corresponding species which are part of Europe’s common natural heritage.

Address: Westendstr. 3, 78315 Radolfzell, Germany
Webpage: www.euronatur.org
E-mail: info@euronatur.org

**Directorate of the Belasitsa Nature Park**
Establishment: 2008

Belasitsa NP Directorate is a unit of the Executive Forestry Agency under the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. The NP Directorate is responsible for the management of the Nature Park of Belasitsa.

Address: 14 Belasitsa Str., 2880 Kolarovo Village, Petrich Municipality, Bulgaria
Webpage: www.belasitsa.net
E-mail: dppbelasica@iag.bg

**Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF) – Belasitsa branch**
Establishment: 1997

BBF brings together people with different perceptions for the preservation of Bulgarian nature. Underlying everything we do is a belief that natural resources preservation is only possible through public awareness. We strive to increase recognition of the opportunities and benefits of protected areas and work for their long-term protection.

Address: 13 Vasil Levski Str., fl.4, 2700 Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
Webpage: www.bbf.biodiversity.bg
E-mail: belasitsa@biodiversity.bg

**Management Authority of Lake Kerkini National Park**
Establishment: 2003

The management authority’s aim is to administer and manage the whole area of the wetland of Kerkini through conservation of the biodiversity, continuous guarding of the protected area, public awareness raising and environmental education.

Address: Kerkini, 620 55 Kato Poroia, Greece
Webpage: www.kerkini.gr
E-mail: info@kerkini.gr

**Environmental Association Planetum**
Establishment: 1999

EA Planetum has an experience in the field of waste management, environmental education and development of sustainable tourism.

Address: 22 Dekjemvri Str. BB, 2400 Strumica, F.Y.R Macedonia
E-mail: planetum@t-home.mk