

# ISSUE SHEET 1



## ADOPTING A LANDSCAPE APPROACH

Nature conservation is often assumed to be in competition with the utilisation of natural resources for economic and social purposes. Yet this does not have to be the case; landscapes can be managed to serve multiple purposes that operate synergistically. The landscape documented here is the watershed of the Bregalnica river in the Republic of North Macedonia. It is here that the Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) has worked over 2012 – 2023, supporting a range of activities that, together, have contributed to maintaining the diverse flora and fauna of the region at the same time as ensuring opportunities for local people to gain an economic livelihood, enjoy pleasant scenery and preserve their cultural heritage. The landscape approach adopted by the programme conforms to ten broad principles, outlined further below. This overview is complemented by other Issue Sheets providing details of specific interventions.

*"In adopting a landscape approach, the NCP has taken care to engage all stakeholders from local to national level and to acknowledge their diverse interests. The programme has shown how nature conservation and local development can be mutually reinforcing, rather than antagonistic."*

Marjana Shushlevska, Team leader of NCP, April 2023, Skopje, North Macedonia.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED

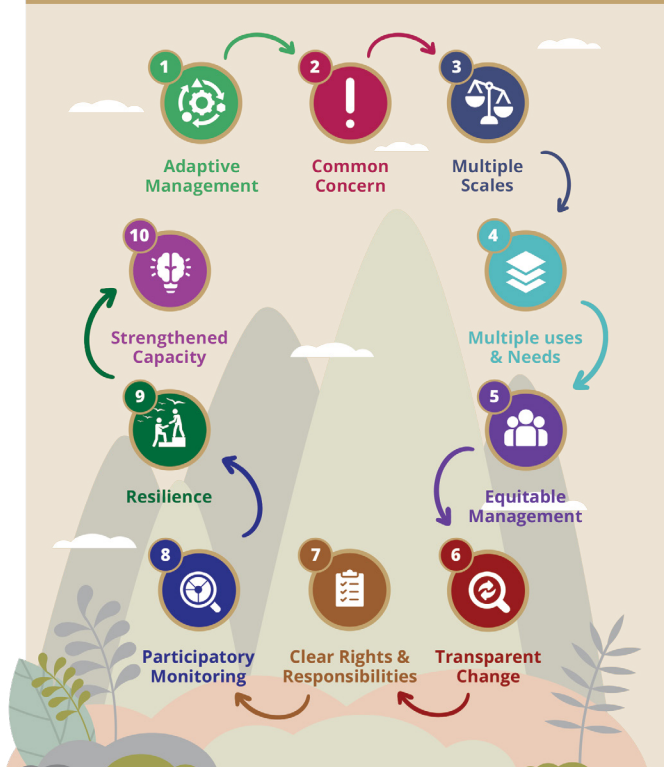
- A landscape approach is a useful tool for managing the multiple demands of diverse stakeholders in a participatory manner - mitigating the potential competition between biodiversity conservation and socio-economic interests
- There are no short cuts; using a landscape approach is a long and complex process that requires dedicated financial and human resources, good time management, persistence and strong commitment
- Political will is essential for ensuring nature protection in the face of economic interests
- Whilst adaptive management is necessary to respond to contextual changes, it should not be used to compromise the overall goal of sustainability



## DEFINING AND CATEGORISING THE LANDSCAPE

The Bregalnica watershed covers just over 4,300 km<sup>2</sup> or 17% of the North Macedonian territory. It is characterised by a mosaic of varied ecosystems ranging from ancient beech and other forests in the most eastern part of the region, rice fields in the middle, and a unique steppe area in the lowland part. The total population inhabiting the basin is more than 150,000 people. In implementing a landscape approach under NCP, the entire Bregalnica watershed was defined as one landscape. The watershed broadly corresponds to the administrative boundaries of the East Development Region, although there are a few minor differences.

## The 10 Principles of the Landscape Approach



The ten principles of a landscape approach were first set out in a publication by Sayer, J. et al., 2013<sup>1</sup> and are illustrated in diagrammatic form below. To quote the authors, the concept arose out of a need for “allocating and managing land to achieve social, economic, and environmental objectives in areas where agriculture, mining, and other productive land uses compete with environmental and biodiversity goals.” The concept has been attributed to the Center for International Forestry Research, CIFOR, but draws on thinking from a variety of academic disciplines and practical experience, including work on common property resources such as that of Nobel Prize winner (Economics), Elinor Ostrom.

This issue sheet takes each of the ten principles of a landscape approach in turn, discussing their application in the context of the Bregalnica watershed.

## 1. CONTINUAL LEARNING AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Nature conservation efforts in North Macedonia may be traced back to the time that the country was part of Yugoslavia; the focus was then mainly on the Southern part of the territory, around Lake Ohrid. The ecosystems of the Bregalnica watershed were relatively poorly known or documented until plans were made in the early 2000s to proclaim the Osogovo mountains a protected area (see text box). Although this did not happen, the information collected served as a starting point for the work of the NCP when it began its inception phase in 2012. Always conceived to have a duration of at least 10 years, each phase has built on earlier experience and learning – both generated through the programme and from other sources.

### THE LONG PATH TO THE PROTECTION OF THE OSOGOVO MOUNTAINS

From 2006 onwards, extensive data on the biodiversity of the Osogovo mountains was collected by the Macedonian Ecological Society, MES, in collaboration with the Frankfurt Zoological Society and ProNatura. The process of proclaiming Protected Area status was at a final stage when it was terminated due to changes in policy decisions. Nevertheless, it provided a solid information base on which the NCP could build in matters such as species distribution, stakeholder identification, and perceived risks and mitigation measures. The lessons learned from the earlier experience, the gaps and good practices were all taken into consideration when working towards Protected Area status for the mountains. Ultimately, this was successful when in November 2020 the Osogovo Mountains were proclaimed the first Protected Area of any significant extent in the country for 60 years.

<sup>1</sup> Sayer, J. et al. Ten principles for a landscape approach to reconciling agriculture, conservation, and other competing land uses. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci.* 110, 8349–8356 (2013).

However, this characterisation of a phased approach masks a long and complex procedure in which stakeholders were engaged at every turn. Furthermore, the programme remained flexible enough to adapt to any changing context and to incorporate relevant experience from other projects. Perhaps the most important change in this respect was that of local politics, since three local elections were held over the period of the Programme. In some cases, elections brought major changes to the composition of elected members of the 12 municipalities of the Bregalnica watershed (a further three are partly covered). Here Programme flexibility entailed re-establishing good relations and mutual understanding with the newly elected individuals, including sometimes repeating capacity-building events.



## 2. AN ENTRY POINT OF COMMON CONCERN OR INTEREST

Nature conservation was not a common point of interest amongst stakeholders when the programme began; however, a concern that did unite all stakeholders was the depopulation of the Eastern region - especially rural depopulation. This trend may largely be attributed to a lack of well-paid jobs and opportunities, resulting in younger people moving away and leaving an increasingly older population behind. The existing private sector – mainly mining and timber processing – felt this as keenly as municipalities and local communities in general. Furthermore, with old ways of labour-intensive land management declining, the patchwork of different land uses, habitats and their associated biodiversity was deteriorating, whilst vulnerability to landscape fires, floods and soil erosion was growing. Framing the project in terms of rural regeneration - supporting rural livelihoods linked to sustainable natural resource management - lead to more ready stakeholder “buy-in”.

The NCP sought throughout its lifetime to cultivate stakeholder engagement not only through the workshops and capacity building events, but also through a steady public awareness campaign about the importance of the natural environment and its potential link to jobs in tourism and sustainable agriculture. Small grants to municipalities and local organisations for environmentally friendly initiatives (see Issue Sheet 4); social media posts; a quarterly newsletter; local and regional TV coverage; the employment of prominent Instagram “Influencers” to tour the Bregalnica watershed and post positive stories; short videos and ultimately the popular movie Honeyland all served to build positive stakeholder perceptions. This has been tracked through public awareness surveys.

### 3. OPERATING AT MULTIPLE SCALES – LOCAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL, INTERNATIONAL

Although the NCP operated out of Skopje, which was important for national level consultations, it took care to have a strong local presence in Bregalnica. This included a locally based (and locally born) member of staff. The Programme established a working partnership with the Centre for the Development of the East Planning Region (CDEPR) and the 11 municipalities of its territory plus an additional four municipalities lying within the Bregalnica watershed. It also coordinated with a range of local and regional private sector interests. At the same time, the NCP worked with national stakeholders, notably relevant government bodies (Ministries of Environment and Physical Planning, MoEPP and of Agriculture, Forests and Water Economy, MAFWE; Public Enterprise National Forest, PENF), non-government organisations (the Macedonian Ecological Society, MES, and other NGOs), and the educational sector (professors and students of the Hans Em Faculty of Forest Sciences, Landscape Architecture and Environmental Engineering, the Faculty of Natural Science and Mathematics, and the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food, all of Skopje University, and the University of Stip). Care was also taken to align steps for protected status with international processes, especially IUCN criteria for Protected Areas and the Natura 2000 network of protected areas within the European Union.

Experience showed that it was important to have a dedicated team belonging to a neutral party to coordinate all these different stakeholders. This role was undertaken by the Swiss NGO Helvetas in the first phase and the Macedonian company Farmahem thereafter, with Helvetas retaining a back-stopping role. This arrangement not only allowed for efficient organisation and financial management; it also facilitated interactions between stakeholders holding differing opinions.

### 4. MULTIPLE USES AND NEEDS

An early analysis of the utilisation of the Bregalnica watershed showed there to be often multiple uses within the same location (such as forestry, hunting, bee-keeping and the collection of non-timber forest products), whilst other uses were and are exclusive and location-specific (such as mining).



Photo: Ljubomir Stefanov

The full range of uses includes but is not limited to pastures for sheep and cattle (with associated dairy production), arable farming (predominantly wheat in higher areas and rice in irrigated lowlands), orchards, mining, private and government owned forestry with associated wood-based industries, hunting, fishing, bee-keeping, non-timber forest product collection, and recreation (especially hiking and biking with associated touristic opportunities). All these land uses, and the different stakeholders associated with them, had to be taken into consideration when planning the future of the Bregalnica watershed.

*“The specifics of land use mirror the diversity of human practices as accommodated to the availability (or scarcity) of resources provided by natural ecosystems to support their livelihoods, featuring peoples’ association to their surrounding landscapes. Understanding land use and resource management specifics provides a broad scale perception of synergies and divergences in both the conservation and the economic development incentives in Bregalnica region.”*

– Daniela Jovanoska PhD, landscape expert

## 5. MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS (EQUITABLE MANAGEMENT)

Identifying all stakeholders and conducting an analysis of their needs, positions and level of influence was a starting point for every NCP intervention. The resulting stakeholder positioning matrix provided a solid foundation for establishing multi-stakeholder dialogue at every scale from local to national and vice versa. More than 150 different stakeholders at different levels were involved in NCP activities during its duration.



## 6. NEGOTIATED AND TRANSPARENT PROCESSES

Transparency was an essential feature of the whole process of working towards nature conservation in the Bregalnica watershed. Having identified and characterised the numerous stakeholder groups, the project team sought to actively engage representatives of each group in all the processes leading up to the designation of national Protected Areas, identification of Natura 2000 sites and restoration of certain riparian [riverside] forests).

*“The boundaries of the Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo PAs were subject to intensive discussions and negotiations among more than 25 stakeholder groups and different governmental and local institutions. This entailed organising more than 100 meetings, forums, and public debates. Besides the need for nature protection, it was important to include also the needs of the local population and their intentions for economic development. Therefore, communication with stakeholders and community mapping of needs and plans was used as a tool and basis to create the most suitable PA borders and regimes for the management of natural values and use of natural resources.” – Despina Kitanova, coordinator for protected areas within Macedonian Ecological Society.*



An important tool used in the negotiation of the two Protected Areas that were eventually designated was Companion Modelling (see Issue Sheet 2). This uses different potential scenarios, and takes the form of a game played by stakeholder representatives.

## 7. CLEAR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The NCP facilitated a range of planning processes at which key stakeholders were invited to discuss what was to be done, how and by whom. In this way their rights and responsibilities were clarified from the outset. These planning processes took place at national, regional and local level and resulted in a series of planning documents. They are as follows:

- National Strategy for Nature Protection with an Action Plan (2017 – 2027)
- Spatial Plan for the Eastern Planning Region (Draft; in January 2024, this was still to be finally approved by parliament)
- Strategy and Action Plan for Tourism Development of the Eastern Region
- Regional Forest Development Plan of the Maleshevo region
- Management Plans for Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo PAs.

In the case of the PAs, the relevant municipalities were intensively engaged to ensure that they had ownership of the management plans and agreed to their role. These discussions required repetition on several occasions following local elections and a change in representatives. The initiation of the PA process for both Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo came from the local level; in the case of Osogovo Mountains, it was a council of mayors of the East Planning Region; for Maleshevo, it was the municipalities Pehchevo and Berovo.

### PROTECTED AREA (PA) MANAGEMENT BOARD

Regarding the PAs, the management body consists of a management authority and two councils – the council of stakeholders and the scientific council. The council of stakeholders includes representatives of relevant national institutions and local public, civil and private sectors. Council decisions frame the development of the yearly operational plans and programmes of the PAs.

## 8. PARTICIPATORY, “USER-FRIENDLY” MONITORING

As far as the NCP is concerned, various tools are in place for effective monitoring, notably a monitoring matrix; annual partner workshops; regular steering committee meetings; evaluation questionnaires; partner reports and regular audits. In addition, public opinion has been regularly canvassed over the project period, focussing on nature conservation and Natura 2000.

All the project monitoring tools have helped to embed the transparent and participatory process that was adopted - but they will only continue for the project period. For longer term monitoring of the PAs, a system is in place known as the METT (Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool). First developed by the World Bank and WWF, reflecting IUCN criteria, this system is widely used in other countries for protected area management. Formulated as an Excel sheet, the METT must be completed at the end of every year and is used for planning activities in the following year. It is, however, a self-evaluation document for which data is collected by those responsible for PA management.

The METT allows – indeed requires - the participation of a wide range of expertise, but not of members of the public. However, the fact that NCP has established a strong participatory footing means that all stakeholders are aware of their rights, including participation in the PA Management Board. Members of the public can therefore demand to know the results of the monitoring and the implementation of the management plan.

A system for the scientific monitoring of the biodiversity of the PAs, the Natura 2000 sites and the riparian forest conservation area was established during the project period, and benefits from a very comprehensive baseline dataset, as outlined in Issue Sheet 2.



## 9. RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF THREATS AND DISTURBANCES

Resilience may be considered in socio-political, economic or ecological terms.

Socio-political resilience has been inbuilt in the entire participatory, multi-stakeholder process; in the increased public consciousness about the importance of nature; and in the active engagement of municipalities and local NGOs in small nature conservation projects (see Issue Sheet 4).

Economic resilience is influenced by many factors beyond the control of the project. Nevertheless, it has been promoted through eco-tourism (see Issue Sheet 6) and sustainable agriculture. Local companies, most notably the mining sector, also support the Protected Area scheme as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility.



Ecological resilience has been promoted in a variety of ways, the most obvious being the immediate conservation of the biodiversity of the Bregalnica watershed.

More specific examples are the restoration of riparian forests to reduce the risk of flooding and soil erosion, and support for forest fire management. The latter has led to a new SDC project specifically addressing landscape fires in the Western Balkans.

## 10. STRENGTHENED STAKEHOLDER CAPACITY

Stakeholder capacity building took multiple forms; beyond participatory workshops and tailor-made training sessions on specific topics, it included opportunities for “learning by doing” and study tours. Perhaps particularly effective in this regard were study tours for peer-to-peer exchanges. For example, mayors meeting other mayors in Bulgaria; a visit by a group of mixed stakeholders to nature parks in Switzerland that have combined socio-economic development and biodiversity conservation; and a visit of PENF foresters to Serbia during which they saw how protected areas are managed and seedlings of riparian (riverside) tree species are raised.

*“Beside the local office, we also have regular contact by email etc with other project members and attend workshops – we’re kept updated on all the project activities such as eco-tourism and Natura 2000. The trainings organised through NCP have also really helped to strengthen the capacities of municipal staff.” - Toni Stoimenovski, Delchevo municipality, Local Economic Development Officer, November 2021*

*“The various capacity building activities that were carried out through NCP, especially the exchange of experiences with colleagues from the Public Forestry Enterprise from Serbia, as well as the large number of activities in which the employees of PENF were directly involved, significantly contributed to improving their knowledge. They acquired new skills in relation to the management of protected areas, raising seedlings of willow and poplar seedlings, ecosystem services, etc. Meetings with colleagues from Serbia who are directly involved in the management of protected areas and the opportunity to hear the challenges they faced, the ways they coped, and the lessons they learned were especially useful. This was particularly significant for us at public enterprise given that we have similar duties and responsibilities. All this contributed to PENF taking on the role of manager of two newly declared protected areas for the first time in this country - and thus more intensively promoting and implementing sustainable and integrated forest management.” - Mare Basova, Deputy director of PENF, May 2023*

## MAIN RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The key results of the landscape approach adopted by the NCP to support nature conservation and enhance rural livelihoods may be summarised as follows:

- Two Protected Areas, Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo, have been proclaimed, following the requirements of the current legislation which makes full stakeholder agreement mandatory. The combined area of these new PAs, 60,268 ha, contributes an additional 2,3% to the country's designated protected areas
- Six rare natural phenomena (“natural rarities”) have been designated
- By reforesting 6.5 ha in the lower reaches of the Bregalnica River, a 15 km strip of riparian forest has been restored
- Three Natura 2000 sites have been identified and documented
- 70 households have directly increased their income through selling sustainably produced goods/ services although many more have benefited indirectly
- As determined through a public survey, 68,5% of the population of the Bregalnica watershed has an increased awareness about the value of nature and the importance of its sustainable use

What is not immediately apparent from these facts is perhaps the most important result. That is that key representatives of diverse stakeholders having sometimes opposing interests now share a sense of ownership over nature conservation in the Bregalnica watershed, and a commitment to its implementation beyond the life of the project.

## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Take care to identify all stakeholders at the beginning, ensuring that no-one is left out; an appropriate tool for their engagement should then be defined – tailor made as/if necessary
- Consider engaging a neutral party to implement the approach (including the financial management); this can help to ensure impartial, multiple stakeholder engagement
- Adopt a systematic process of data collection, analysis, the identification of high value areas, negotiating boundaries, establishing the documentation, obtaining the proclamation of protected area status, ensuring a strong base for sustainable management – and all the way along building stakeholder engagement
- Consider organising peer-to-peer exchange in similar contexts; this is probably the most effective means of changing mindsets
- Public awareness raising campaigns can be a very useful supporting tool; if backed by surveys, they allow the tracking of changing perceptions or opinions
- Promoting knowledge exchange with other projects in the locality/country is important to ensure synergies and avoid over-lapping efforts
- Allow at least 10 years for the whole process.

This Issue Sheet was produced by Marjana Shushlevska, NCP's Team Leader, Katerina Atanasovska, NCP's Programme Officer, both from Farmahem and Jane Carter, Senior Adviser, Natural Resource Governance, Helvetas. It entailed consultation with many NCP stakeholders, including but not limited to those quoted. For further information, please contact [farmahem@farmahem.mk](mailto:farmahem@farmahem.mk).

The Nature Conservation Programme, NCP in North Macedonia is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC. Implemented in phase 1 by Helvetas in partnership with Farmahem and then in phases 2 and 3 by Farmahem with backstopping support from Helvetas, the total project lifespan is effectively 12 years (2012 – 2023).