

## Biodiversity action plans as a way towards local sustainable development

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Local action for biodiversity is essential for ensuring better conservation status for biodiversity and maintaining ecosystem services. After years of conflict and instability, countries in Western Balkans are progressing towards more stability and increasing quality of life. Many local communities continue to face high levels of poverty and unemployment, especially in rural areas. Western Balkans is home to a large number of exceptional habitats and species, including many endemics. These include mountain mixed forests home to Brown Bear, Lynx and Wolf; wetlands that act as a refuge to pelicans, ducks and herons; but also traditionally and extensively used agricultural landscapes of high natural value. In many places this rich biodiversity is still relatively untouched and represents an outstanding asset for local sustainable development. However, biodiversity is under serious threat in the Western Balkan Region, particularly in farmland, mountain regions, and coastal zones. The loss of biodiversity happens primarily because of land use changes, urban sprawl, infrastructure development, acidification, eutrophication, desertification, overexploitation, the intensification and/or abandonment of agriculture, tourism development and climate change. Coastal zones, rivers and wetlands face the most threats in the short term; in the long term, mountain meadow ecosystems are also vulnerable. The root causes of these threats are: changes in economic activities, socio-political factors, failure of conventional economics to recognise economic values of natural capital and of the ecosystem services. Biodiversity is an important asset that the region is bringing to the EU, but it is threatened by the rapid economic development and societal changes of the last decade (UNDP, 2009). There is a clear need for a more flexible, people-oriented and visionary approach for sustainable use of the natural areas.

This paper provides an approach namely “Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAP)” as a part of an international project<sup>2</sup>, which is a comprehensive and integrated approach to biodiversity and ecosystem services for the sustainable development of rural municipalities and their local communities in the Western Balkans. Together with the local stakeholders, selected municipalities do so by establishing LBAPs as a process that involves stakeholder participation, communication and awareness raising, identifying pro-biodiversity business opportunities (i.e. sustainable eco-tourism), and developing partnerships. The project focuses on ten small municipalities: Peshkopia (Albania), Goražde and Srebrenica (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Gostivar and Mavrovo - Rostuša (Macedonia), Pljevlja and Žabljak (Montenegro), Bajina Bašta and Čajetina (Serbia), and Dragash (Kosovo). Municipalities are playing a key role in promoting and preserving biodiversity for several reasons. Ecosystems with greater biodiversity are more resilient to physical disturbances, natural disasters, and invasive species. Diverse ecosystems provide ecological services that are expensive to replicate, like air and water purification, attract pollinators, and provide natural material for advances in science and medicine. Ecologically rich areas also provide a great aesthetic value for recreation and reinforce a sense of place for residents and tourists, bringing a bit of nature into the area. The approach taken in the context of this project introduces biodiversity and the benefits it provides to local communities in terms of goods and services (e.g. pollination, water purification, sustainable forestry, eco-tourism, etc) as a cross cutting issue in the local development policies and actions. Through the development of the LBAPs, which on the one hand identify the main biodiversity conservation issues (red list species, ecosystems at risk, future pressures) and on the other hand search for opportunities for sustainable tourism, development associated with their conservation can be achieved. A Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) sets

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out the necessary steps that should be taken by a municipality to protect, plan, manage and make use of its local nature and wildlife now and in the future.

The key success factor of the plans is the involvement of the local people that help to carry out the actions it contains. This framework is designed for conserving biodiversity at a local level and for ensuring public participation and awareness and community involvement. One of the clear benefits of having such a plan is to provide better quality of life and human well-being in a local area. For example, increased quality of natural life can generate more local investment through attracting more visitors in the region. As well as providing a source of cultural and spiritual development, biodiversity was seen as a source of local pride and heritage for future generations. Therefore it is a cornerstone for many local traditions that connects people and biodiversity.

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