



United Nations
Development
Programme

Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains

Programme Area:

Energy and Environment

Project Number: 33627

Project Start: June 2004

Planned Duration: 5 years

Implementing Partner:

Ministry of Agriculture and Forests (MAF)

Other Project Partners:

Ministry of Environment and Waters (MOEW)

Green Balkans Federation;
Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds

Total Project Budget:

US\$ 18,201,706

Direct GEF Financing:

US\$ 3,545,460

Co-financing:

US\$ 14,583,246

- MAF;
- MOEW;
- Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works;
- UNDP Bulgaria Projects.

Associated Financing:

- Swiss Government
US \$ 73,000

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Project Description:

The goal of the UNDP/GEF Rhodope Project is to protect globally significant biodiversity and to promote its sustainable use in the Rhodope Region. The project aims at conserving the unique natural and anthropogenic mosaic of habitats, species and land uses that form the Eastern and Western Rhodope landscapes. Activities are focused in areas with sensitive ecosystems and landscape components, such as priority conservation areas, buffer zones and corridors, as well as more general forest, pasture and agricultural lands.

Project Objectives:

- 1) Landscape-scale conservation is effectively operationalized in Eastern and Western Rhodope (GEF-financed and co-financed);
- 2) Stakeholders integrate biodiversity into resource management and economic development policy and practice (GEF-financed and co-financed).

Location:

The project is implemented within the whole Rhodope Region, with a focus on two distinct sub-regions – the Eastern Rhodope and the Western Rhodope – comprising more than 40 priority municipalities.

Planned Project Outcomes:

- Structures for effective landscape-scale conservation established and operational
- Information baseline established and strengthened as a basis for adaptive management
- Sustainable management regimes piloting a landscape-based approach to conservation undertaken within the Rhodope Region
- Monitoring/Evaluation (M&E) and lessons learned
- Institutional capacity to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem management objectives into productive sector programmes strengthened
- Forestry, tourism and farming practices reoriented to support conservation while improving livelihoods
- Financing for sustainability of the applied conservation and cross-sector coordination secured

Project Achievements to Date:

The Rhodope Project implements its activities on a large-scale community basis. The two Project Regional Centers in Smolyan and in Kardjali, as well as the Municipality Focus Groups (MFGs), that work in 27 priority municipalities, are the main tools for a better project implementation. The MFGs consist of representatives of the municipality and governmental structures, the private and nongovernmental sectors, as well as informal local leaders, building consensus between the nature conservation and the local development of the region. The MFG Meetings have become fora for discussions on environment conservation issues and their being observed during the decision-making process. Successful examples are the designed Environment Protection Programmes for 12 municipalities. The three General Stakeholder Meetings held so far represent an other important instrument in the process of planning and implementing project activities. Good examples of this are: a campaign, targeting young people in the region, and aiming at raising their awareness on nature conservation issues; training

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sessions on the following subjects: "Business Development" (more than 90 people), "Project Formulation" (80 people), "Public-Private Partnerships", "EU Operational Programmes" 2007-2013 (160 people) and last but not least The Programme for Demonstration Projects (PDP) initiated by the Rhodope Project in the beginning of 2007 and finalized in May 2008. The main objective of the PDP was to show on-the-ground activities in the field of biodiversity conservation in the 4 priority project areas – sustainable forestry, sustainable agriculture, ecotourism and biodiversity conservation. The PDP resulted in modernization and building of 175 km eco trails, over twenty recreation places, designing strategies on tourism development in the Rhodope Region and increasing the awareness of the Rhodope visitors.

The project works effectively for raising local people awareness about the region, collecting data for natural recourses, through implementation of large scale field habitat surveys (covered more than 200 000 ha habitats) and spices (8), but also through monitoring (implemented by volunteers) of birds and 7 protected spices, among them *Hermann's tortoise*, *Spur-thighed tortoise*, *Souslic* and *Maidenhair Fern*. In addition, a study on the bat fauna in the Phodope Region has been carried out. The collected information has been used as a base for GIS for the Rhodope Region, which is promoted as a modern tool for territorial planning among stakeholders. In order to promote GIS, four meetings and 20 trainings for capacity building of representatives of the local planning bodies have been held do far.

The project also focuses on protected areas' management.

An assessment held in 2005, based on the RAPPAM approach, served as a starting point for implementing various activities such as Developing Management Plans for 10 Protected Areas, developing a small tourist infrastructure and creating two Consultative Councils for management of the PA in Eastern Rhodope and Smolyan District, respectively. The Project initiated the preparation of Management plans for the Natura 2000 plots, where the participation of local stakeholders will be the main accent. Action Plans for protection of habitat and spices as *Rhodope tulip* and *Rhodope lily* are among the activities that support the protection of the nature in the region. In 2008 the project effectively applied Action Plans for protection of *Terrestrial tortoises* and *Egyptian vulture*.

With regard to sustainable forestry, the Rhodope Project supported the first real forest certification in Bulgaria in 2006 (under FSC standard) - Dospat State Forestry and Borika Private Cooperative. As part of the process of certification, the Bulgarian Forest Certification Standard was tested on the ground and 20 experts were trained in carrying out forest certification assessments. In 2007-2008 the project launched the certification process of "Shiroka poliana" Forest Unit (FU), the State Forestry (SF) "Kirkovo", SF "Ivailovgrad", SF "Yakoruda" and the State Hunting Units "Shiroka Laka" and "Beglika". It is thanks to the Rhodope Project that the above mentioned FUs complied their practices in accordance with the international requirements for sustainable forestry management. During the whole certification process the Project has worked actively for boosting the capacity of the forestry experts.

In the field of the sustainable agriculture the project works actively for raising farmers awareness. Series of seminars and trainings on organic farming and agro-ecology (more than 120 people) were conducted. Inventory of Indigenous Breeds Farms was finalized and the establishing of two model farms is undergoing. Over 60 farmers were supported in formulating agro-ecology plans and completing application packages for agro-ecology measures of SAPARD Programme. An educational round trip in nine organic farms was organized for 18 farmers from the region. The aim of the trip was to familiarize the farmers with the differences between organic and conventional production, plant cultivation troubles in respect of the disease and insect control and prevention. Organic production market opportunities in Bulgaria and Europe were also highlighted.

In the field of eco-tourism the Project brought together local stakeholders around the "Ethic Charter for Sustainable Development of Ecotourism in the Rhodope Region". Approximately 100 people were trained in the field of ecotourism and some analysis have been carried out on a basis of which the project will continue its efforts in further

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developing sustainable forms for ecotourism and will support the existing info centers. A brochure for the PA in Smolian District and maps for the PA in the Rhodope Mountain were also developed, published and disseminated. A study on the existing tourist info centers together with an assessment of the necessity of capacity building in the region have been conducted. A study on already existing green certifications has been also carried out. The main findings were presented at a Regional meeting with the participation of local small hotel owners, tourism experts in municipalities, as well as representatives of the local tourist info centers. In 2008 and 2009, local entrepreneurs had the opportunity to get acquainted with the best practices in the field of ecotourism in the framework of trainings, round tables and site visits, held under the Project.

The Rhodope Project implemented a series of surveys, the big part of which aimed at introducing environment protection issues to the local development and the production sectors. A good example for this is the elaboration of Guidelines for integrating key Conventions into the local planning documents. Another part of the studies, carried out under the Project, are focused on ensuring financial sustainability of nature conservation issues, including cost assessment of eco-system functions. Three baseline surveys on people's attitudes towards nature conservation have been also conducted in the framework of the Project.