

Belasitsa Beyond Borders Transboundary Cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt

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Final Report
(including details for the implementation period July 2015 to September 2016)

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Objective					
<p>The territory of the Belasitsa Mountain is located in the border triangle of Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia in the core of the Balkan Green Belt, the southernmost strip of the European Green Belt. Belasitsa Mountain is characterised by a rich biodiversity like natural forest ecosystems of native old grown chestnut (<i>Castanea sativa</i>) and <i>Fagus sylvatica</i>, intact and representative communities and ecosystems in the alpine zone, and wetlands. The area is of high importance for the conservation of different bird species too.</p> <p>Despite the high ecological value of the Belasitsa Mountain and its legal protection currently several examples of inappropriate land use can be observed, like intensive timber logging, overexploitation of non-timber forest products, and construction of micro water power plants in sensitive locations. In order to guarantee the protection of livelihoods for the benefit of people and biodiversity it is necessary to develop strategies which integrate nature conservation with social development.</p> <p>The overall goal of the project is to contribute to joint long-term conservation and promotion of the unique biodiversity of the transboundary Belasitsa Mountains. The project activities focus on environmental education and the development and promotion of ecotourism offers as closely interrelated approaches. The following specific objectives have been defined:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.) Develop international partnership for the conservation of Belasitsa, including exchange of know-how and capacity building. 2.) Promote benefits of economic development measures (e.g. ecotourism) as a long term tool for nature protection. 3.) Raise general public awareness of the values of Belasitsa as unique nature site. 					
Methods					
<p>In order to enhance sustainable development of the area, focusing in an equal way on ecological, social and economic aspects, transboundary cooperation is of high importance. At the same time, awareness on the high natural values of the area and the chances involved (e.g. ecotourism) needs to be risen on local, national and international level. Consequently, the project activities focus on environmental education and development and promotion of ecotourism offers.</p> <p>The project is based upon a strong transboundary cooperation as an integral part of all activities in order to enhance the contact and cooperation of key players in nature conservation and sustainable development in all three countries.</p>					
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Results and Discussion

Overall the project was implemented in its full extend as originally planned. The project implementation considerably contributed to joint long-term conservation and promotion of the unique biodiversity of the transboundary Belasitsa Mountains. The activities were fulfilled on the territory of all three countries Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia sharing the mountain as well as in Germany.

More than 350 people were directly involved in the project activities, more than 14,000 people visited the "The Incredible Belasitsa" photo exhibition. Twenty nine separate events were organized and performed within the project duration. All this points out the impact had and has in and for the area. The project implementation led to improved partnerships in the region, promoted sustainable and nature friendly economic development and increased public awareness of the values of Belasitsa.

Due to the exchange of experience and numerous presentations of good practices in the field of ecotourism during project implementation, awareness among many of the direct beneficiaries of the project was significantly raised concerning the (economic) potential of nature based tourism.

A very important project result is the creation of a common image of the international Belasitsa region. Before the start of the current project only few people regarded Belasitsa as "one", but thought of it as an area divided by borders and as part of three countries. By continuously and consistently promoting Belasitsa as one area rather than pointing out national borders during project implementation, perception of locals and tourist service providers has significantly changed. Today, the area is regarded as a common area, not taking into account the respective country as much as formerly. One can easily hear local tourist services providers speaking of the advantages the international region brings and without relying solely on what a single country offers.

An important step forward in building a common image of the international region was the elaboration and distribution of the Joint catalogue of ecotourism services and products which is the first occasion in the history of the area when tourist services and attractions from the whole international region are gathered in one publication.

Public Relations

Web-portal about the project as well as the Belasitsa region: www.belasitsa.com

Brochure about the Belasitsa region:

https://www.euronatur.org/fileadmin/docs/projekte/Belasitsa_Transboundary_Cooperation_2016.pdf and https://www.euronatur.org/fileadmin/docs/projekte/Belasitsa_Discover_Belasitsas_Treasures_2016.pdf

The photo exhibition "The Incredible Belasitsa" visited four different locations in Bulgaria and attracted more than 14.000 people during the project duration.

Conclusions

Probably the most important outcome of the Belasitsa Beyond Borders project implementation is bringing people together. Thanks to all project events and products, thanks to mutual work with partners from different countries we managed to bring tourist services providers, governmental and non-governmental organisations and local people together. They are unified by the beautiful Belasitsa Mountain and by their common ideas for the future development of the region.

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2 Summary

From January 2013 to September 2016, the project “Belasitsa Beyond Borders” was implemented by different organisations from Bulgaria, Greece, FYR Macedonia and Germany. The project was funded by Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt as well as through own means of all participating organisations.

The project 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 neighbouring countries sharing the mountain. The project activities focused on environmental education and the development and promotion of ecotourism offers as closely interrelated approaches and addressed different target groups (high school students, university students, local tourist services providers, national tourist operators) with the aim to achieve maximum leverage and distribution of project outcomes.

During implementation of the project, more than 350 people of different age and target groups (see above) were directly involved in the project activities by participating in youth and working camps, exchanges and trainings. Additionally, more than 14,000 people from Bulgaria, Greece, FYR Macedonia as well as other countries visited the photo exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa”, presenting high quality pictures from the area. For most of them, visiting the photo exhibition was the first time to learn about Belasitsa and its valuable nature.

Apart from promoting Belasitsa on national and international level, the activities implemented within the project significantly contributed to raising awareness about the valuable nature of Belasitsa and its potential for nature based tourism as source of income among locals which led to an increased understanding of the need as well as the will to protect nature in the Belasitsa Mountain in order to preserve this ecologically and economically valuable good for future generations.

In addition, due to its clearly defined trilateral character, resulting in the consistent inclusion of stakeholders from all three countries sharing Belasitsa Mountain in all project activities as well as the close cooperation of all project partners involved during project implementation, today, the area is regarded as “one” rather than thinking of it as “divided between three countries”. This in return results in the will and wish of relevant stakeholders from all three countries (mainly in the tourist sector), to cooperate and develop joint tourist products in order to make visiting Belasitsa more attractive.

Last but not least, during the course of project implementation, also the already existing good cooperation of the implementing organisations was further strengthened and the will for future cooperation beyond termination of the project was expressed by signing a joint Memorandum of Understanding as well in the elaboration of a follow-up project proposal which was handed in at the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) in summer 2016 which will continue project activities with a strong focus on promoting Belasitsa as eco-tourism destination using the European/Balkan Green Belt as marketing tool.

3 Background and objective

Belasitsa Mountain is located in the border triangle of Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia in the core of the Balkan Green Belt, the southernmost strip of the European Green Belt. Belasitsa Mountain is characterised by a rich biodiversity comprising a high number of specific sub-Mediterranean, Mediterranean and mountain ecosystems.



Figure 1: Belasitsa Mountain in the transboundary region between Bulgaria, Greece, and FYR Macedonia (Source: Google Maps)

The outstanding ecological value of the transboundary Belasitsa Mountain is reflected in a high amount of protected areas: The area is designated as Nature Park in Bulgaria (Nature Park Belasitsa) and as National Park and Ramsar Site in Greece (Lake Kerkinis National Park), additionally it comprises several Sites of Community Interest (SCI) according to the Habitats Directive, Species Protection Area (SPA) according to the Birds Directive, Important Bird Areas (IBA), Important Plant Areas (IPA) and sites which are part of the Emerald network.

Preserving the natural forest ecosystems of native old grown chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) and beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is one of the priorities of Belasitsa Nature Park. The sweet chestnut woods in Belasitsa are the largest not only in Bulgaria, but on the Balkans. The alpine zone of Belasitsa Mountain is an example for an area with intact and representative communities and ecosystems. Several wetlands can be found at the foothills of the Mountain. The area is also of

high importance for the conservation of different bird species like *Ficedula semitorquata* (Halbringschnäpper), *Dendrocopos leucotos* (Weißrückenspecht), *Dryocopus martius* (Schwarzspecht) and *Picus canus* (Grauspecht). The eastern slopes of Belasitsa in Bulgaria and Greece are part of the main migratory route of the songbirds along Struma/Strimonas River (Via Aristotelis). Lake Kerkini National Park with its riparian forest connects to important nesting and wintering sites for several threatened bird species. The lake itself is used as stop over site during migration and is a very important wintering site for Dalmatian Pelicans (*Pelecanus crispus*, Krauskopfpelikan).

Despite the high ecological value of the Belasitsa Mountain and its legal protection currently several examples of inappropriate land use can be observed, like intensive timber logging, overexploitation of non-timber forest products, and construction of micro water power plants in sensitive locations. In order to guarantee the protection of livelihoods for the benefit of people and biodiversity it is necessary to develop strategies which integrate nature conservation with social development.

The project “Belasitsa Beyond Borders - Transboundary Cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt” started in January 2013 with total project duration of 36 months. The project was prolonged twice and eventually ended in September 2016. The project was funded by DBU and jointly implemented by EuroNatur and Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation Branch Belasitsa in close partnership with the Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate (Bulgaria), the Management Authority of Lake Kerkini National Park (Greece), and Environmental Association Planetum – Strumica (FYR Macedonia) as associated partners. The overall goal of the project was to contribute to a joint long-term conservation and promotion of the unique biodiversity of the transboundary Belasitsa Mountains. The project activities focused on environmental education and the development and promotion of ecotourism offers as closely interrelated approaches.

4 Description of activities and results

The Project Team implemented the last set of activities in the frame of the project in the period between 1st July 2015 and 30th September 2016. The activities from the last reporting period are described in detail below together with an overview of all activities since the start of the project in January 2013.

4.1 Environmental Education

4.1.1 International youth working and learning camps

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application:

This activity aims at the active involvement of youth in nature conservation and sustainable development activities. The camps comprise of a theoretical part including lectures on biodiversity and nature conservation and a part with field trips in order to present specific natural features in the region. In addition, a variety of practical activities are foreseen such as marking tourism trails and collecting waste. Another central aspect of the camps is the development of a case study paper aiming at local tourism development and nature conservation.

Each year one camp will be organized, alternating between Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia. The duration of each will be six days and each camp will include 15 young people (18 years and up) from the three countries (if possible representing an even share of nationalities). Preferably, students in nature sciences and young people motivated to contribute to nature conservation will participate in the camps.

Expected outputs are: collection of ideas/final working paper from each camp with practical and realistic ideas/proposals from participants for local tourism development and nature protection.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

The 3rd International Youth Camp “Belasitsa 2015” was held in FYR Macedonia from 4th to 9th August 2015. The camp took place in the village Smolari, Novo Selo municipality at the foothills of Belasitsa Mountain. The participants were accommodated at the guest house “Sivacevi” - a newly established facility in the area.

The organizing of the event was partly done in the previous reporting period and included a number of activities connected with the selection of the sites to be visited, lectures to be held and lecturers to perform them. Additionally, workshops to be held in the frame of the camp were organized and respective agendas elaborated (Annex 1). Most of the preparation phase work on the camp was done by the team of EA Planetum with the constant support and consultancy from the other project partners, taking into account experiences from previous camps.

The official announcement of the 3rd International Youth Camp was done in July 2015. The invitation (Annex 2) for the event was sent to the media, youth organisations in the area, providers of tourist services as well as to the people included in Belasitsa Beyond Borders contact list. A notice was published on the web-portal www.belasitsa.com. Each project partner was responsible for recruiting participants from their own country.



Figure 2: At guest house “Sivacevi”, village of Smolari

Finally, 13 participants registered for the camp (Annex 3). Seven participants were from FYR Macedonia, six from Bulgaria. Despite the efforts of the Management Authority of Lake Kerkini National Park, no people from Greece applied for participation. Information about the camp together with the invitation was sent to the University of Thessaloniki, local municipalities, volunteers working on the territory of the National Park, tourist services providers from the area, partner organizations and others. Main factors affecting negatively the process was on one hand the very unstable political and social situation in Greece at that time, as well as the lack of good public transport connection between Greece and FYR Macedonia in the region. Although the project team was ready to ensure private transportation for the participants we had no Greek applicants.

The agenda of the Youth Camp was elaborated in cooperation between the project partners under lead of EA Planetum. During the Youth Camp the participants got to know the FYR Macedonian part of the mountain and its surroundings. They visited the three most popular Belasitsa waterfalls: Smolari Waterfall (the biggest in Macedonia), Koleshino Waterfall and Gabrovo Waterfall. To get to know more about the rich nature of the area the participants paid a visit to the famous Mokrino springs and Monispitovsko Swamp as one of the biodiversity hotspots in Southeastern FYR Macedonia. The Youth Camp participants had the chance to enjoy the unique cultural and historical heritage of Belasitsa too. They hiked to the St. Ilijah Monastery and visited the beautiful Monasteries and temples in Vodoca and Velusa. Part of the event were historical lectures about the St. 15 Martyrs of Tiveriopolis, the Roman thermal springs at the village of Bansko and about the historical locality Pirgo. All this allowed the young people not only to get acquainted with the area but to appreciate its values too.



Figure 3: Lecture at Roman thermal springs



Figure 4: At Monispitovsko Swamp

There were two thematic workshops as the first of them included elaboration of little colourful pillows filled with aromatic herbs. Every participant made at least one pillow and took it home as a gift. The other workshop was focused on nature protection and consisted of writing beautiful messages about nature on wooden boards. The participants wrote twelve messages, which were installed on the tourist trail to the Smolari Waterfalls.



Figure: 5, Figure: 6 and Figure: 7 Aromatic herb pillows and nature message boards elaborated by the participants

The evenings of the Camp were time for free activities and socializing. As well as time to hear some more stories about the charming Belasitsa Mountain.

At the Camp the participants had the chance to learn more about the work of EA Planetum in the area. They were introduced to the main activities of the organization and met the leading members of the association.

On the last day of the Camp the youths filled out the evaluation sheets (Annex 4), and exchanged their ideas about the tourist potential of the area (Annex 5). There were a lot of

different, creative and interesting ideas for developing the rural alternative tourism at the foothills of Belasitsa.

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

In total, three youth camps were organised (one in each participating country) in the course of project implementation with a total of 42 participants from three countries. While the share of Bulgarian and Macedonian participants was more or less even (17 Bulgarians, 19 Macedonians), only six Greeks participated. The camps were a chance for the participants to become well acquainted with the natural, cultural and historical heritage of Belasitsa Mountain in all three countries. The youths not only visited the most prominent nature and tourist sites but also shared their ideas of the way the region could develop in the future. The 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. Youths stayed at local guest houses where all the time they were surrounded by local people which helped them to better understand the local lifestyle and further enriched their knowledge and fondness of the area. And - last but not least - a number of new contacts among young people from the region and away were created.

Participation in the youth camps did not only broaden the young people's knowledge, but led to better appreciation of the values of nature. The implementing project partners are convinced that participation in the youth camps increased the "love of nature" of all participants and contributed to form responsible young people whose know-how is important to protect our environment and who will in the future act as ambassadors of Belasitsa.

After finalizing the activity, two of the Macedonian participants became active supporters of the EA Planetum and are often helping the organisation on voluntary basis.

The implementation of the three Youth Camps also strengthened contacts with providers of local tourist services and led to an improved collaboration. Holding the youth camps at local venues made the guest house owners discover one more opportunity for future development and let them realize the potential of the region and the advantages a well preserved nature brings. In FYR Macedonia, the project team established new contacts as the camp was held in a newly established facility.

Finally, the youth camps were one more opportunity for the project team to strengthen the mutual collaboration and improve their joint understanding and overall performance. All three camps were a joint effort of the international project team.

All documents and materials associated with the 1st and 2nd Youth Camps are presented in Annexes 6 – 11.

4.1.2 Student exchange

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application:

One exchange trip to Belasitsa will be organized for students who study nature and economic sciences (biology, ecology, environmental protection, tourism, marketing etc.). During the tour to Belasitsa, the students will get to know the potential of the region as destination for ecotourism. Furthermore, they will visit the territories and administrations of Belasitsa Nature Park (Bulgaria) and Kerkini National Park (Greece) in order to get acquainted with the natural values and to gain an insight into administration responsibilities. The participants will attend presentations on biodiversity protection, nature protected areas management, and tourism opportunities in the region. In FYR Macedonia, NGOs and municipalities will present their work related to sustainable tourism development. In working groups the students will develop three concrete tourism product examples connected with particular sites or services in Belasitsa area.

The duration of the exchange will be four days, and the participants will be 21 people from all three countries. Furthermore, three motivated participants in the student exchange (if possible one per country) will be selected and provided with a grant in order to prepare a thesis about certain aspects with relevance for Belasitsa (e.g. tourism development, sustainable development and nature conservation, joint transboundary management of Belasitsa etc.).

Expected output/results are: Reports describing concrete tourism product examples, three Master and/or Bachelor thesis.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

None (see below for further description of activity)

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

The International Student Exchange took place from 1 until 4 November 2013. All activities were planned and the program (Annex 12) was elaborated in cooperation between the project partners under the lead of BBF – branch Belasitsa. Each partner was responsible for developing the program in their respective country.

A total of 19 students from Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia participated in the event (Annex 13). The biggest number of participants came from Bulgaria, only two participants were from FYR Macedonia and one from Greece. Two of the Students were coming from the region of Belasitsa. All the other were coming from diverse locations around Bulgaria, from Skopje (FYR Macedonia) and Thessaloniki (Greece).

Similarly to the Youth Camp the interest in Greece remained low. The reasons for this were also in this case mainly connected with the low popularity of the Belasitsa region in Greece and transport difficulties. Several attempts were made to attract more participants from Greece. Professors from two universities were contacted personally and furthermore members of different Environmental NGOs in Greece received a request to help the project team recruiting participants.

The same was done in FYR Macedonia. The universities in Stip, Bitola and Skopje received the invitation together with Macedonian Ecological Society (Environmental NGO) and local media in Strumica region which only resulted in two participants from FYR Macedonia.

As a result of the relatively low interest in Greece and FYR Macedonia we managed to attract only 19 instead of the planned 21 participants in the Student exchange. Furthermore the

countries proportional participation was by far in favor of Bulgaria. The project team is trying to compensate for this by distributing information regarding different events in the Belasitsa region to the students who took part from these two countries so that a bigger circle of people will be reached in the two countries.

The participants in the Student exchange learned about Belasitsa Mountain, the culture, and the history of the region. The exchange took place in Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia. The students were acquainted with the natural values and tourism opportunities of the area and gained an insight into the administration responsibilities of Belasitsa Nature Park and Lake Kerkini National Park.

In Bulgaria, the students visited Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate and the Information Centre in the village of Kolarovo. Additionally they paid a visit to the thematic tourist trail “The Butterflies and flowers of Belasitsa”, the 100-years-old Sveti Prorok Ilia church in Belasitsa village, the White Fountain above the village of Samuilovo and Dabicata waterfalls.

In FYR Macedonia, the students visited the village of Bansko and the ancient Roman baths, one of the most beautiful nature sites in the mountain - Koleshinski waterfalls - as well as the village of Gabrovo and Lake Doiran.

The exchange finished in Greece where the participants had the chance to see the village of Akritochori, heard a lecture at the Information Centre at Kerkini National Park and participated in a boat trip on Lake Kerkini enjoying its rich biodiversity. Furthermore the students were involved in an informal discussion on the topic of tourism development in the area together with tourist services providers from the region.

Additionally, the students developed ideas regarding the future development of the area as a site for nature friendly sustainable tourism (Annex 14 and Annex 15). They worked in groups and developed different ideas such as Animal Theatre, Art Contest, Mountain and Specialized Nature Tours, Sport Camp, Local Food Degustation and others. The students’ ideas were revised and some of them were presented during the training of nature guides in the frame of the project.

The student exchange contributed to the promotion of Belasitsa and its natural value to a diverse group of students coming from different universities in the three countries. Visiting the three countries the exchange built a common image of the international region. On top of this the event demonstrated the participants the benefits of ecotourism as an economic development measures and a long term tool for nature protection. It gave the students a chance to get personally involved with the future of the International Belasitsa region through their own tourist product ideas.

The student exchange was a very suitable forum for selection of the students who elaborated the diploma thesis later on.

The exchange contributed to the development of an international partnership for the conservation of Belasitsa through the contacts created. Many of the participants are still in constant touch with each other exchanging news, initiatives and other environmental information regarding the area. Begging of 2016, the teams of BBF – Belasitsa Branch and EA Planetum together with two of the students were working on ideas for a mutual survey of the

biodiversity of the Macedonian part of the Mountain. Furthermore one of the participants of the student exchange became part of the team of Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation in Bulgaria.

4.1.3 Elaboration of Students' Diploma theses

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application:

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

The fourth diploma thesis named "Distribution and ecology of *Hymenoptera* on Belasitsa Mountain" (Annex 16) was finalized in August 2015. The author is Kiril Arsovki, a student at St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, FYR Macedonia. The thesis represents the most thorough survey of the order *Hymenoptera* for the area ever performed in FYR Macedonia and adds considerably to the information for the biodiversity of the Mountain. The results of the survey are an important step forward to the completion of the biodiversity data for this part of the mountain which is the least studied in comparison with the Bulgarian and Greek parts. There are nine new species for the fauna of FYR Macedonia described in the diploma thesis. After the diploma thesis was finalized the author elaborated a short article describing the main findings of his work named "The wasps and the bees of Belasitsa" (Annex 17). The thesis received excellent mark from the evaluation commission.



Figure 8: Map of the area covered by the survey with the sample plots



Figure 9: Species richness of *Hymenoptera* on Belasitsa Mountain in FYR Macedonia

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

As planned, students were selected and provided with a grant in order to prepare theses about certain aspects with relevance for Belasitsa. Four students were chosen instead of three (as planned) because the project team received four applications and all of them were well prepared and on important topics for the region. The project team managed to distribute the approved budget between the four students. Two of the students received a grant of 613 Euros and the other two a grant of 434 Euros. Three of the students are from Bulgaria and one is from FYR Macedonia. Unfortunately we could not attract a student from Greece to elaborate a diploma thesis. This is due to the fact that there was only one participant from Greece in the Student exchange who did not intend to work on a topic connected with Belasitsa.

In addition to the thesis described in detail above, the following theses were elaborated and completed by the end of October 2014:

1. The murals of the church complex by the village of Vodocha (FYR Macedonia) - style and iconographic characteristics, National Academy of Art, Sofia – Bulgaria (Annex 18 and Annex 18’);
2. Research on ornithofauna on chosen locations and survey on ornithotourism opportunities on the territory of Belasitsa Nature Park, South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad – Bulgaria (Annex 20);
3. Research on Whitebacked (*Picoides leucotos*) and Black woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*) on chosen locations in Belasitsa Nature Park, South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad – Bulgaria (Annex 22).

All three diploma theses contributed to enrichment of the knowledge about the region of Belasitsa and all three received excellent marks.

The thesis “The murals of the church complex by the village of Vodocha (FYR Macedonia) - style and iconographic characteristics” is focused on researching the murals of a unique and valuable medieval cultural monument situated on the territory of Strumica municipality, FYR Macedonia. The results considerably contribute to the improvement of the knowledge of the cultural and historical heritage of the region of Belasitsa and particularly its part situated in FYR Macedonia. The results of the diploma thesis were well received and recognized among the specialist in Bulgaria. A proof of this is the presentation of the scientific work on two conferences (International scientific conference “European Southeast during the second half of 10th and the beginning of 11th century” held in the Bulgarian Academy of sciences and National scientific conference “1000 years Samuil’s Bulgaria” organized by South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad – Bulgaria in cooperation with Bulgarian Academy of sciences and regional historical Museum, Blagoevgrad).

The second thesis “Research on ornithofauna on chosen locations and survey on ornithotourism opportunities on the territory of Balsitsa Nature Park” contributed on one hand to the knowledge of the biodiversity of Belasitsa Nature Park, Bulgaria, and on the other hand proved that the area of Belasitsa has a certain potential for development of nature based ornithotourism. The research provided a valuable insight into the opportunities for developing tourist products connected with ornithotourism in the region. The thesis includes the opinion of several specialized nature tour operators working in Bulgaria on what can be attractive in the area of Belasitsa and which are the points to work on in order to improve the possibilities for such types of tourist activities. The findings provide a valuable basis for future work for nature friendly tourism development in and around Belasitsa Nature Park territory. The results of the thesis can be used both by Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate and Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation in their future work in the area as well as even for development of international avifaunistic tours in the region.

The thesis “Research on White-backed (*Picoides leucotos*) and Black woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*) on chosen locations in Balsitsa Nature Park” provided valuable information on the distribution of two rare bird species on the territory of Belsitsa Nature Park, Bulgaria. It was very well accepted by the approval commission and the audience at South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, as well as by the administration of the Nature Park.

The results of the thesis enrich the knowledge of the distribution and the major habitat preferences for two rare and protected bird species on the territory of the Nature Park which enables the administration of the protected area to take better decisions in their management.

The White-backed woodpecker is one of the rarest woodpeckers in Bulgaria and the knowledge about it is insufficient on state level. Consequently, the thesis will contribute to the better understanding of the species distribution in the country. Furthermore, in 2015 an action plan for the management of the species in Bulgaria was to be elaborated and the results of the diploma thesis contributed to this major strategic document as well.

After the three diploma theses were elaborated and approved the authors prepared a short article describing the main findings of the diploma thesis (Annex 19, Annex 21 and Annex 23). The articles are uploaded on the web portal belaitsa.com which contributes to popularity

increase of the region and inform about the implementation of the “Belasitsa beyond borders” project.

In total, four diploma theses were elaborated in the frame of the project. The project team managed to finance one more than the planned three theses within the project budget. All four of them contributed significantly to narrowing the knowledge gap in the international Belasitsa Region. Three of the theses were surveys of biodiversity and the fourth one had cultural focus. All this once again demonstrated the diversity and the richness of the area. Through the diploma theses assignment, the project team did not only involve four young and motivated people to work in Belasitsa, but raised the interest in the region to three different universities in Bulgaria and FYR Macedonia.

4.2 Development and promotion of sustainable tourism

4.2.1 Development of human resources for sustainable tourism

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application

A series of one day training courses (two per country) will be organized for key players in ecotourism (e.g. hoteliers, providers of tourism products and services) to foster sustainable tourism activities in the region. During the courses, facts on ecotourism and sustainability in tourism as well as information on how to start a related service will be presented. The trainings will be organized for tourism providers in each country of Belasitsa Mountain and will be adapted to the needs and level of eco-tourism development in the specific area (e.g. regarding hospitality, ecotourism, marketing of services). The trainings will focus on one or two main topics. The duration of each course will be limited to one day as experiences show that this is the ideal length to secure a large attendance. 15 people will take part in each training course.

In addition, three exchanges will be organized (one per country, visiting the other two countries) for providers of tourism products and services from Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia. These events aim at exchanging best practice examples. Each exchange will take two days and will include six participants (thus the total number of participants of the exchanges will be 18 people). A strong link to activity 1.2 is intended (e.g. include outputs of master theses into the exchanges).

Expected output/results are: Joint catalog of ecotourism services and products. List of necessary interventions produced as a result of brain storm exercise together with the local providers of tourism products and services.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

None (see below)

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

All the three planned exchanges for providers of tourism products and the six one-day training courses for key players in ecotourism were implemented in the previous reporting periods.

The first of the three exchanges was held in October 2013. Representatives of the tourist business from the region of Kerkini National Park (Greece) visited Bulgaria and FYR Macedonia. All of the participants (Annex 24) are involved in family hotel businesses in the area of Belasitsa and Kerkini National Park (Greece). The participants were chosen by the team of Kerkini National Park Authority as they know the area and the local tourist services provider best. The criteria for selection were activeness in the tourist business and desire for international collaboration.

For two days, the participants had the chance to get acquainted with some of the tourist attractions, nature heritage, and local cuisine and folklore as well as to meet and speak with colleagues from the other two countries. On the first day, the group visited Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate and were introduced to the work of the protected area administration regarding sustainable tourism. The tourist services providers attended a short trek to Kameshnishki waterfalls and the White fountain locality. Of course visits to some of the accommodation facilities on the Bulgarian side of the mountain were part of the programme (Annex 25). The guests got to know guest house "Iankish" in Samuilovo and "Neri" Complex in the village of Yavornica where they were welcomed by a local folklore group.

The second day was spent in FYR Macedonia where the people from Greece visited the village of Bansko and the ancient Roman Baths, the springs at Morkino and had the opportunity to taste the delicious cuisine at Panorama restaurant. There they met some of their colleagues from FYR Macedonia and discussed common issues.

Later in the year in November 2013 representatives of the tourist business from the region of Strumica (FYR Macedonia) visited their colleagues from the other two countries. All of the participants (Annex 26) are involved in the tourist business in the area of Strumica (FYR Macedonia). Unfortunately, at the last moment, one of the participants withdraw his participation so that instead of six there were only five visitors from FYR Macedonia. In order to nevertheless distribute the information as wide as possible it was agreed that the participants will share their experiences with as many colleagues as possible. Also Alexander Lazarov from the Macedonian project partner EA Planetum shared his observations on different meetings with tourist services providers in the region of Strumica municipality.

The participants in this exchange were chosen by the team of EA Planetum. The criteria for selection were activeness in the tourist business and desire for international collaboration. As laid down in the programme (Annex 27) and similarly to their Greek colleagues the participants visited Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate and were introduced to the work of the protected area administration regarding sustainable tourism. The tourist services providers attended a short trek to Kameshnishki waterfalls and got to know some of the accommodation facilities on the Bulgarian side of the mountain.

On the second day the people from FYR Macedonia were in Greece where they attended a presentation of Lake Kerkini National Park Authority on their work for sustainable tourism development and visited the Information Centre of the protected area. Afterwards, they attended a boat trip on the lake and finished the day with an exchange with some of their Greek colleagues.

The last of the three planned exchanges for providers of tourism products was organized and performed in June 2014. For the period 21-22 June 2014 representatives of the tourist business from the region of Belasitsa Nature Park (Bulgaria) visited Greece and FYR Macedonia.

The participants (Annex 28) were people involved in family hotel businesses in the area of Belasitsa Nature Park (Bulgaria) as well as locals taking care of organizing folklore events and local fairs. Team members of Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate were responsible for choosing the participants from Bulgaria as they know the area and the local tourist services providers the best.

During the time spent in Greece, Bulgarian tourist providers got to know the work of Kerkin National Park administration as well as the rich nature of the area. They visited a local farm producing famous buffalo products and a local tourist developer. The participants had the chance to learn good examples from their colleagues in Greece as well as to discuss the possibilities for future development of area. The insight of the work of their colleagues left them with a number of new ideas to implement in Bulgaria. The tourist services providers from Bulgaria realized that producing local biological products can turn into a profitable business as long as it is well managed and marketed. They learned how knowing the profile of your visitors in advance can be helpful to make them really satisfied with the services you offer. Topics like what makes a particular region attractive for visitors, how a tourist product can be diversified and enriched and the main challenges for the tourism development in the transborder region of Belasitsa were discussed.

The second day of the exchange led the participants to FYR Macedonia. Here, they visited the area of the Lake Doiran situated at the Southwestern foothills of Belasitsa. For most of the tourist providers from Bulgarian this was an area they have never seen before. Although part of Belasitsa region, the Municipality of Doiran stands away from major road connections and because of this is not that popular in Bulgaria. The tourist services providers were satisfied to find that Lake Doiran and its surroundings offer a memorable mixture of beautiful scenery and picturesque little settlements. With the help of project partners from Planetum EA and local hotel owners the participants learned more regarding the Lake and the tourist facilities in the region. The programme (Annex 29) included visits to cultural sites as well as personal meetings with local tourist providers. The guests from Bulgaria enjoyed the opportunity to discuss common issues with their Macedonian colleagues. The visit not only gave the participants a broader overview of Belasitsa region but also contributed to the creation of new professional contacts.

The tourist services providers from Bulgaria learned about the opportunities that all three countries offer as well as the challenges their colleagues from the other two states are facing. Like the previous two exchanges this one proved to be very useful for the participants as they had the chance to get to know how their colleagues from the other countries are working and what is desired by the clients at different location. Important contacts were made among different tourist services and products providers which will be the base for future cooperation.

As a result from the three exchanges, the tourist services providers from Greece, Bulgaria and FYR Macedonia learned about the opportunities that all three countries offer as well as the challenges their colleagues from the other two states are facing. This gives them a broader overview of the whole region and its tourist potential which is a precondition for further

development and better placing on the market. These exchanges proved to be very useful for the participants as they had the chance to get to know how their colleagues from the other countries are working and what is desired by the clients at different location. Important contacts were made among different tourist services and products providers which will be the base for future cooperation. One of the most important outcomes of this activity so far is the idea of creating a common tourist product including different sites and tourist services in the three countries. For now the idea is on the level of discussion of sites and services but all of the participants in the two exchanges agree that this can develop as an attractive future tourist product. After finishing the third exchange for tourist services providers from Bulgaria, the project team coordinated the elaboration of a common description of this idea as a tourist product proposal with the aim to present it to tour operators.

Throughout the exchange representatives of the project team helped the participants with logistics and communication. Representatives of all local project partners were involved in the logistics of the exchanges. There was always one project team member coming from the participants' country that attended the event and was accompanying the tourist services providers all the time.

The series of one day training courses for key players in ecotourism started in October 2014 with two courses held in Bulgaria. They were held on 29th and 30th October in the administrative building of Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate.

The participants in both trainings were tourist services providers from the settlements situated at the foothills of the Nature Park as well as guests from Greece and FYR Macedonia (Annex 30 to Annex 33). The first training on 29th October 2014 gave the participants a chance to learn more about the tourism development in Belasitsa region in the neighboring two countries. The most intriguing part for the participants were the detailed descriptions of two concrete tourist products – one from Greece and one from FYR Macedonia. They were presented by the owners of the particular sites who described the history of their businesses who are their clients and what they do for marketing, how they work and what are the plans for the future.

This part turned to be of real value for the Bulgarian tourist services provider as they learned a number of important details, approaches and strategies which are applicable in their businesses as well. The presentations of the two “stories from the field” evolved into a fruitful discussion about the right business strategies, needed products and the future of the region. The training proved to be very interesting and useful for the participants as they had the chance to learn more about the trans-border region of Belasitsa, to study in detail good practices and examples, meet colleagues and discuss common topics regarding tourism development in the area.

The second training held in Bulgaria focused on brainstorming ideas and analyzing the potential for future development in the area. Specially developed case studies helped the participants to focus on the needed future interventions in order to improve the condition for sustainable and nature friendly tourism development. The participants spent most of the time working in small work groups on developing an imaginary tourist product situated in Belasitsa region. In this way they listed the needed future interventions in the area (Annex 34, to Annex 36).

The participants in the second training on 30th October were the same people who took part in the first on 29th October 2014.

The two trainings held at the end of October in Bulgaria helped the local tourist services providers to broaden their minds, create new contacts and exchange ideas of the tourism development in the trans-border region of Belasitsa.

The training courses for key players in ecotourism continued with two courses held in November 2014 in Greece. They were held on 4th and 5th November in the administrative building of Lake Kerkini National Park. The participants in the two trainings were tourist services providers from the area of Kerkini National Park as well as from Bulgaria and FYR Macedonia (Annex 37 to Annex 40). The participants were hotel and restaurant managers, tourist guides, local people and representatives of Lake Kerkini National Park management authority, Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate and EA Planetum. Similarly to the previous trainings the tourist services providers had the chance to hear two stories from the field presented by their colleagues from Bulgaria and FYR Macedonia. All participants learned many practical details related to offering tourist business at the other side of the border.

The discussion which followed the presentations proofed that there are a number of similar challenges in the three countries and that working together in the international Belasitsa region could be an advantage. The main challenge specifically in Bulgaria and FYR Macedonia is the lack of sufficient information regarding the region as well as the attractions and services offered. Consequently, Belasitsa is not yet a popular tourist location. Other problems are connected with the lack of adequate financial resources which prevents the owners of small scale hotels and other tourist facilities to perform at their best. Working together in the international Belasitsa region can lead to better and more diverse tourist products and can enlarge the target audience addressing visitors from the three countries as well as visitors from abroad who would possibly be very interested in having the opportunity to visit three countries in a single visit.

The agenda for the second training in Greece on 5th November 2015 included brainstorming ideas and analysing the potential for future development in the area of Lake Kerkini and Belasitsa Mountain. As in the previous course held in Bulgaria specially developed case studies helped the participants to focus on the needed future interventions in order to improve the condition for tourism development in the region. The participants worked in working groups and presented their ideas to the audience. As a result the needed future interventions in the area were listed (Annex 41 and Annex 42).

As seen from the described interventions needed the focus should be on international collaboration on different levels along with construction of visitor infrastructure. This should improve the mutual work in the trilateral region, should create conditions for visitors and should attract new visitors to the area.

The fifth and sixth training courses were held as planned in FYR Macedonia. They took place on 10th and 11th March 2015 in the village of Mokrino. Similar to the previous trainings held, the first training on 10th March (Annex 43) was focused on sharing information of the tourism development in the three countries around Belasitsa. The second one (Annex 45) held on 11th March focused on brainstorming ideas regarding the future development of the area. The participants were tourist services providers from the area of Belasitsa, the municipalities of Strumica and Novo selo (Annex 44 and Annex 46). The same participants attended both trainings held in FYR Macedonia.

The training held on 10th March turned out to be of an interest not only to the tourist services providers in the area but to local media as well. Representatives of a local TV channel and a radio station from Strumica attended the training; the journalists were interested in the main goals of the overall project and the implementation of concrete activities. The project implementation was presented to the media by Vladimir Milushev (Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation) and Aleksander Lazarov (EA Planetum). One of the participants in the training, a local tourist services provider, was interviewed too. He gave a positive feedback on the effect of the project implantation emphasizing on the fruitful experience exchange among the people working in the tourism in the three countries and added that as a result of the efforts of the project partners locals are now building of common image of Belasitsa region regardless of national borders.

The Agenda for the sixth training on 11th March once again produced a list of necessary future intervention regarding two case studies in the area (Annex 47 and Annex 48).

All six trainings for tourist services providers in the three countries played a major role in bringing people involved in the tourism business together and secondly allowed them to share their view on the most important future interventions in the region in order to enhance tourism. This was the first occasion during which such a high number of tourist services providers from the international Belasitsa region met and had the chance to create new contacts and exchange ideas of the tourism development in the trans-border region.

Another important result of the development and promotion of sustainable tourism was the elaboration of a joint catalogue of ecotourism services and products (Annex 49) which was printed in February 2015. The catalogue contains a total of 39 sites and services representing most of the nature oriented examples of tourist services in the international Belasitsa region. It is in English language and comprises of three chapters each devoted to one of the three countries. Each of the included services is described in detail, showing not only the type of location, capacity, and contact details but also additional tourist attractions in the vicinity and specific services and products offered. The catalogue was elaborated in common effort of the whole project team under the lead of Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation and is one more example of the fruitful joint cooperation.

After printing, the catalog was widely distributed in the three countries as every tourist services provider in the region received few copies and some more can be found at the offices of Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation and Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate (Bulgaria), EA Planetum (FYR Macedonia) and Kerkini National Park Management Authority (Greece). Additionally, the catalogue is at dispose of visitors of the information centres of Belasitsa Nature Park (Bulgaria) and Kerkini National Park (Greece). The document is uploaded on the web portal www.belasitsa.com too. Now, every visitor of the area can easily find all the services offered in the three countries. This is the first time in the history of the region when tourist services and attractions from the whole international region are gathered in one publication.

4.2.2 Training of nature guides

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application

Trainings in nature interpretation will be held in order to qualify local people to deliver environmental education tasks. The trainings are aiming at local people from the Bulgarian and Macedonian part of Belasitsa who would like to get involved in guiding visitor groups along trails and support awareness raising activities. The duration of the course being implemented in Belasitsa will be 3 days, for 16 participants in total. The programme of the training course will include a theoretical part on topics like nature interpretation, nature protection, history and culture of the region, working with different target groups, general group psychology and others. There will be a practical training on leading visitor groups on a particular trail on Belasitsa Mountain facilitated by an experienced nature interpreter from BBF. Additional activities will be carried out in close connection to activity 1.2, e.g. discussing organization models for nature guides.

Additionally, it is planned to capitalize the experiences gained in Germany with regard to nature interpretation and the professional organization of nature guides. During the first half of the project it is intended to organize a 5-day study tour to Germany. In the course of the study tour the project team (project coordination and project staff BBF and project coordination EuroNatur, project staff of Belasitsa Nature Park, Lake Kerkini National Park, and Planetum) will visit different German institutions as well as best practice examples for nature interpretation trails.

Expected output/results are: trained nature guides, nature guiding services offered via all possible channels, as appropriate (e.g. website of Belasitsa, at hotels and guest houses etc.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

none

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

As a preparation event for training of nature guides, a five day study tour for the project team was organized and performed in the period 22-27 July 2013. Eight members of the project team took part in the trip to the transboundary region Berchtesgaden – Salzburg and to Lake Chiemsee representing all five project partners. According to the project proposal, it was planned that only six participants take part in the study tour. During the course of the project it turned out to be necessary that more members of the project team participate in order to circle the information as broad as possible. A feasibility check showed that a higher number of participants can be made possible by using a less expensive transport. Instead of travelling by plane a minivan was used for the trip to Germany. The study tour including programme and logistics was arranged by EuroNatur.

During the study tour several locations were visited in the transboundary region Berchtesgaden – Salzburg and at Lake Chiemsee. In Berchtesgaden National Park, the newly established “Haus der Berge” with its “Umweltbildungswerkstätten” was an important point of interest. Except from visiting the “Haus der Berge” and the other facilities, an intensive exchange between the project team and the Environmental Education team of the National Park took place. Besides the aspect of sustainable tourism was discussed, e.g. by visiting a small-scale tourism provider and exchanging with the responsible person of the municipality of Ramsau, by sharing ideas with the planning department of Berchtesgaden National Park, e.g. on possible conflicts between tourism and nature conservation and visitor management. The group also

visited some of the tourist attractions of the region, like Lake Königssee and Kallbrunnalm in the Weißbach Nature Park in Austria. During a meeting with the director of the Nature Park, the group learned also more about transboundary cooperation and the cooperation with local farmers, e.g. to develop a portfolio of regional products.

On the way to Lake Chiemsee the group visited the Bavarian Academy for Nature Conservation and Landscape Management (ANL) to hear about the qualification programme „Certified Nature and Landscape Guide“ (ZNL) which ANL offers. The presentation comprised relevant information for the development of the training course in Bulgaria implemented in 2014. Following the theoretical aspects also the practical aspects were covered during a meeting with a representative of the NGO Nature and Landscape Guides Lake Chiemsee and a guided tour at Lake Chiemsee. The topic visitor management was also covered at Lake Chiemsee and during a visit to the Nature Pavillon Übersee the group could test some of the offers.

During the study tour the project team visited a border region with many similarities to Belasitsa. It could be observed how different organizations and institutions from the two countries work together in order to enhance both biodiversity protection and tourism. The impressions gathered during the study tour were very valuable for the group. The local people seemed to be very passionate with regard to the surrounding nature. The way local people in Berchtesgaden worked together from municipality level to the private tourist services provider - always keeping in mind that the preserved nature of the area is the major precondition for economic development - is something that is good to be transferred to the region to Belasitsa. Concrete examples of how extensive use of natural resources and small scale accommodation and other tourist facilities can bring sufficient profit to the local society can be used as case studies to demonstrate to the people of Belasitsa possible ways to go in the future. Furthermore, the ideas shared with regard to environmental education were very valuable and the functioning of the nature guides system in Bavaria can be used as a base for developing a similar organization (on smaller scale) in the Belasitsa region. The way the personnel of Berchtesgaden National Park and Lake Chiemsee worked on visitor management was a good example for both Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate and Lake Kerkini National Park Authority.

Apart from all the other benefits this trip contributed to strengthen the connections and understanding among all members of the project team. The members of the project team know each other much better after spending those days together. They understand much easier others' viewpoint, problems and the opportunities they have working together. In the months following the study tour the communication within the project team was going much smoother and easier in comparison with what it was before this.

The training of nature guides was organized and performed in the period 3-5 December 2014 in the village of Kolarovo, Bulgaria. As planned the total number of participants was 16. Seven were Bulgarians, eight Macedonians and one from Greece (Annex 50). All participants were chosen so to be local people from Belasitsa region who would like to get involved in guiding visitor groups and support the partners work in the area. We were very happy to have a participant from Greece despite the fact that the work language of the training was Bulgarian. With the help of the project team members from Kerkini National Park we managed to find a

lady interested in nature guiding who speaks Bulgarian. She was very glad to attend the training and to learn a lot not only about nature interpretation but of the region too.

Most of the training was held in the visitor centre of Belasitsa Nature Park in the village of Kolarovo. This way the presenters and participants took advantage of all available interpretation facilities and supportive materials available there.

The agenda (Annex 51) of the event included presentations, discussions, practical exercises and a field visit. During the training, the participants were taking an active role in all activities performed. For many of them it has been the first time to be introduced to nature interpretation. Nevertheless they showed not only great interest but also good skills in performing it.

The theoretical part of the training consisted of main principles and methods of nature interpretation as well as the structure and contents of an interpretative program. The theoretical part was developed based on the publication "A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets" (Sam H. Ham), experience gained by the project members in Germany during the Study trip as well as on materials elaborated by National Association of Publicly Funded Training Centers in Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection (BANU) and Bayerische Akademie für Naturschutz und Landschaftspflege (ANL) kindly submitted by EuroNatur. The participants had a chance to test most of the knowledge gained by performing short actives and elaborating their own programs. They had the chance of working on developing short interpretation activities and present them to the others. This way they manage to apply the theoretical knowledge in practice.

An important part of the training was the practical training on leading visitor groups on the "Life of the Chestnut" interpretative trail on Belasitsa Mountain. This allowed them to build upon the knowledge and skills learned in the previous day and to face a real life interpretation in the field.

At the end of the event, each participant received a certificate (Annex 52) for successful completion of the training.

Later on in the course of the project implementation two of the people attending the training had the chance to perform nature interpretation in practice. In May 2015 the team of EuroNatur visited the area and the two local guides led the visitors on the "Life of the Chestnut" interpretative trail. They managed with the task and proofed that the training is a good starting point for creating nature guide service in the area.

The training of nature guides provided a solid basis of developing this type of services in the area in the future. Within only a few days of training, the participants gained knowledge and skills to perform this responsible activity in a very decent way. Among them there are a number of people with desire and potential to become passionate and skilful guides. Nevertheless, it is clear that having a number of well presenting nature guides in the region will need more training, experience gain and promotion of that kind of services. In this regards the profiles of the active nature guides in the region are uploaded in the tourism section of the web portal www.belasitsa.com.

4.2.3 Joint transboundary promotion of Belasitsa as eco-tourism destination

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application

If Belasitsa is to become a real and successful cross-border tourist destination of three countries, special marketing must take place, targeted both towards tourists visiting the area and towards tour operators from the three involved countries. The promotional measures produced in the course of this project will include:

- Production of a joint multilingual image brochure to promote the natural and cultural sights of the area, mainly working with pictures (2100 copies, 4 + 4 colours).
- Production of joint information boards; placement of boards at central locations which are most visited (e.g. near the borders on main cross roads) in all three countries (one board in each country).
- Further development and translation of the web-portal www.belasitsa.com. The current information will be revised and updated and after that translated into English. Additionally, information about the Greek part of Belasitsa will be included.

Expected output/results are: image brochure for Belasitsa; three info-boards; web-portal

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

During the past reporting period the project team continued its work on the development of the web-portal www.belasitsa.com. The final texts regarding the Bulgarian part of the region were uploaded on the web-portal in Bulgarian language and the translation into English was accomplished. The uploading of the English texts started in October 2015 only as there have been some technical issues beforehand regarding the operational matrix of the web-site. As all texts and their translation into English for Bulgaria and Greece were elaborated in the previous reporting periods all information was uploaded on the site. With this all the work regarding Bulgaria and Greece is finalized.

There are few more texts regarding the FYR Macedonian part of Belasitsa Mountain that need further revision and translation into English to finalize the work regarding improvement of the web-portal.

The project team continues to maintain up to date information flow on the site. All major events in the area are published in the “News” and “Events” sections of the site as well as all news regarding the implementation of the “Belasitsa beyond borders” project.

The web-portal www.belasitsa.com is one of the major information and marketing channels used by the team of BBF-Branch Belasitsa and the whole project team to spread news and information regarding our activities in the International Belasitsa Region. The improvement and the translation of the site into English are a big step forward in the promotion of the valuable nature as well as the tourist opportunities in the area.

During the current reporting period three info boards (Annex 53 and Annex 54) have been elaborated and installed in Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia. The purpose of the boards is to provide information about the goals, terms and implementation of Belasitsa Beyond Borders Project. Both text and design were jointly developed and approved by all project partners.



Figure 10: The information board installed in front of the Belasitsa Nature Park Administration, village of Kolarovo, Bulgaria

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

A joint multilingual image brochure (2500 copies, 4 + 4 colours) (Annex 55) was elaborated under active participation of all project partners in February 2014. Pictures from the photo contest “The Incredible Belasitsa” were used for the production of the brochure. The publication represents the region of Belasitsa in all three countries. The brochure contains texts in English, Greek, Bulgarian and Macedonian. After its printing the brochure was widely distributed in all three countries. Copies of it are available at the offices of Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation and Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate (Bulgaria), EA Planetum (FYR Macedonia) and Kerkini National Park Management Authority (Greece). Additionally, the image brochure is at dispose of visitors of the information centres of Belasitsa Nature Park (Bulgaria) and Kerkini National Park (Greece). The document is uploaded on the web portal www.belasitsa.com too. The brochure accompanied all presentations of the Incredible Belasitsa photo exhibition.

4.2.4 Development of ecotourism infrastructure and services

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application

This activity is targeted at tourists (national and international), and includes:

- Development of the so-far voluntary initiative “Winter Belasitsa” as a tourist service on international level providing targeted professional support. The initiative includes climbing of the highest peak Radomir. It will be organized three times in the course of the project.
- Development and implementation of a nature information (interpretative) trail in the FYR Macedonian part of Belasitsa (funded by FYR Macedonian municipalities and/or private entrepreneurs; expertise from Bulgaria).

Expected output/results are: Three rounds of “Winter Belasitsa” organized; one nature interpretative trail developed in the FYR Macedonian part of the mountain installed.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

The elaboration of a nature information (interpretative) trail in FYR Macedonia continued in the past reporting period. After the difficulties the project team had experienced in the previous reporting period, the work on the trail went much smoother after September 2015. At first the route of the trail was chosen and precisely marked. The trail connects two of the main villages at the foothills of Belasitsa starting at the ancient Roman baths in the village of Bansko and finishing at the waterfalls at the edge of Gabrovo village. After the route was chosen, it has been checked for private sectors in the local Cadastre service, slightly modified and finalized.

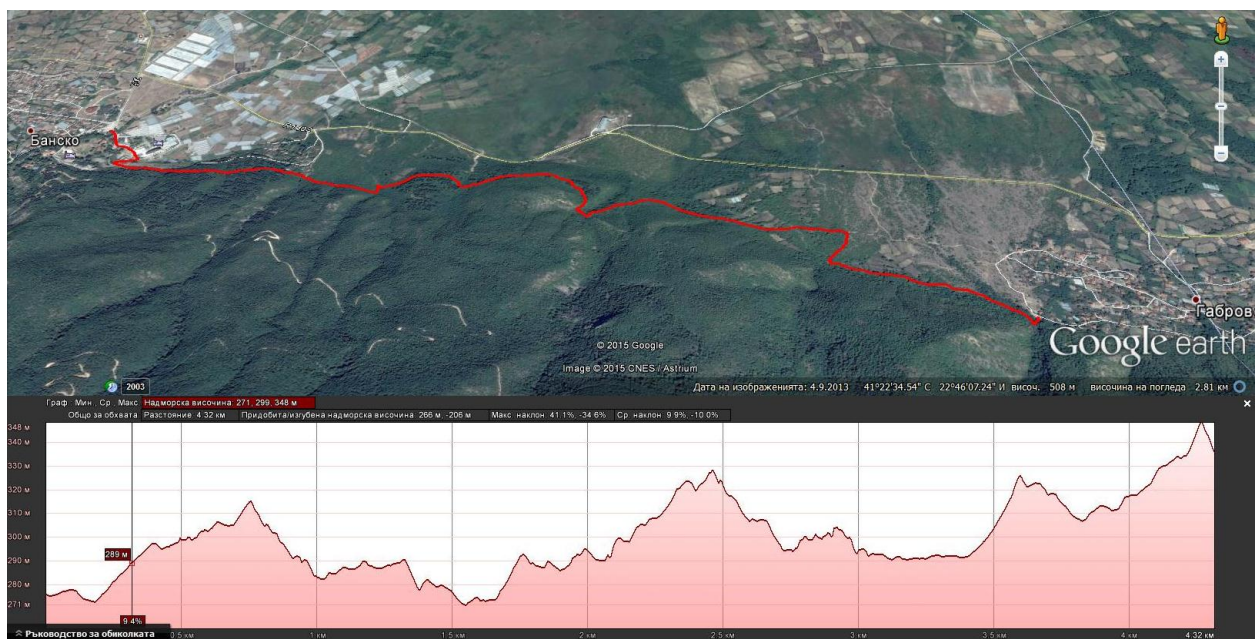


Figure 11: The route of the nature information (interpretative) trail in FYR Macedonia (map source: Google Earth)

In September 2015 the concept for the trail elaboration (Annex 73) was developed and later in October all the text for the information boards were added to it. The two main messages that the trail conveys are:

- Belasitsa Mountain and Strumica Municipality offer attractive locations for recreation and tourism;
- The Nature of Belasitsa is a wealth which we all should preserve.

In October the project partners EA Planetum received the co-financing from Strumica municipally and the field work started in November 2015. The terrain of the trail was cleared and levelled up so to be suitable for walking.



Figure 12 Terrain Work on the Nature Information Trail

In January 2016 the design of the information boards was finished. All the information boards have common design and are illustrated with specially elaborated artist drawings (Annex 74).

The trail is named “The Roman Road” and tells the story of this part of Belasitsa Mountain as seen through the eyes of a Roman soldier. This approach was chosen in order to make it more attractive for visitors and due to the fact that it starts at the old Roman Thermae at the edge of Bansko village. The information provided on the trail presents in a unique personal way the rich history and the valuable nature of the Mountain. It is not only a walk at foothills of the Mountain but a journey in the time too.

The information is placed on 7 information boards distributed along the route. All the boards are listed in the table below.

No	Name
1	THE ROMAN ROAD
2	THE ROMAN THERMAE
3	THE SECRET INHABITANTS OF THE MOUNTAIN
4	GIFTS OF THE FOREST

5	PLANTS OF THE MOUNTAIN
6	WATERS OF ORBELOS
7	THE ROMAN ROAD

The whole trail was finished in March 2016, including 7 information boards and two water fountains.



Figure 13: Two water fountains were elaborated along the Nature Information Trail



Figure 14: One of the information boards installed along the Nature Information Trail

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

In total, three “Winter Belasitsa” tours with a total of 94 participants (Annex 56 to Annex 59) were organized. During the implementation of the project, “Winter Belasitsa” turned into an event well known all over Bulgaria. In 2014, the first Greek participants took part; also the event is known in the Belasitsa part of FYR Macedonia. Recurrent tourist events as “Winter Belasitsa” can increase the popularity of a region and attract additional visitors to the area. Through “Winter Belasitsa”, many people heard about the possibilities for winter hiking on the mountain and learned about the additional activities available in the area in the winter months. The event also helped the local tourist services providers to get to know a specific target group, its needs and appreciation for the advantages of a region with rich folklore traditions and unique cuisine. “Winter Belasitsa” creates an image of the region as an appropriate alternative and nature friendly tourism site. Belasitsa Beyond Borders Project helped ensuring the sustainability of the event. After the end of Winter Belasitsa 2015, the BBF team will continue to organise and hold the event every year. The tour for 2016 is already under preparation and will take place from 12th and 14th February.

During the project a nature information (interpretative) trail named “The Roman Road” on FYR Macedonian side of Belasitsa were developed and installed. The trail connects two of the main villages at the foothills of Belasitsa starting at the ancient Roman baths in the village of BANSKO and finishing at the waterfalls at the edge of Gabrovo village.

4.2.5 Organizing photo contest and exhibition about Belasitsa

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application

The contest will be international and therefore announced via all accessible channels as widely as possible. 15 best pictures for each country will be selected to form a traveling exhibition which will be displayed in the project area. Furthermore, the pictures will be used for the image brochure and information boards (see activity 2.3).

Expected output/results are: 45 professional photos collected for the future promotion of Belasitsa as eco-tourism destination; traveling exhibition organized and promoted.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

The project team presented the exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa” at 4 different locations. At the beginning of the summer holiday season the exhibition was presented at the Regional library in Burgas – the second biggest city at the Black sea Coast in Bulgaria. At this time of the year the city is visited by many tourists from all over the country and abroad and is one of the best locations for such events in the country. More than 40 visitors attended the opening event and enjoyed not only the beautiful pictures of Belasitsa but intriguing stories from the area presented by the team of Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation. The exhibition stayed in Burgas for the period 29th June – 17th July. The total number of visitors for this period was above 700. There were many visitors for whom this was first acquaintance with Belasitsa and the exhibition played an important role of introducing them to the area and building a very positive image of the whole region.



Figure 15 and Figure 16: Photo exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa” in Burgas, June 2015

In the beginning of October 2015 the exhibition visited Sofia – the capital of Bulgaria. As it was arranged earlier in the year, the photographs were presented in the National Museum of Natural History – the major and biggest museum of such type in the country. Again, there has been a short opening event presenting the International Belasitsa region, the valuable nature and rich culture and history of the area. The event was accompanied with a quiz and degustation of local Belasitsa wine. The exhibition stayed in the National Museum of Natural History for almost 50 days from 12th October to 30th November and was seen by 7721 visitors with the following age distribution:

- Children up to 7 years – 1392;
- Schoolchildren and students – 3832;
- Adults – 2497.

Most (7191) of the visitors were Bulgarians and 530 foreigners. The presence of the exhibition in the National Museum of Natural History considerably contributed to increasing the popularity of Belasitsa all over the state.



Figure 17 and Figure 18: Photo exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa” at National Museum of Natural History, Sofia, October – November 2015

The photo exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa” was part of The Challenge Days - a very popular event among the mountain sports and outdoor lovers. It took place between 1st and 4th December in the National Palace of Culture in Sofia, Bulgaria. The Challenge Days is promoting outdoor activities organized every year by a number of tour operator companies and

environmental NGOs in Bulgaria. It offers exhibitions, presentations, films and discussion sessions together with a small market for outdoor goods.

Due to this event the exhibition reached a huge audience of people loving and often visiting the outdoors - a very suitable target group to what Belasitsa offers. The Challenge Days were visited by more than 3000 people who had the chance of seeing “The Incredible Belasitsa”, situated in the main hall of the event where all presentations and discussions took place. Among the guests of the event were the Minister of the Environment and Waters, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Food, the ambassador of France in Bulgaria as well as famous mountaineers and sportsmen.



Figure: 19, Figure: 20 Photo exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa” at The Challenge Days, Sofia, December 2015



Figure:21 Photo exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa” at The Challenge Days, Sofia, December 2015

After the presenting the exhibition in Sofia, the local authorities Kostinbrod Municipality wished to welcome it at their City Hall until the end of the year. An opening event was organised by the project team on 10th of December where a short visual presentation of Belasitsa region and the opportunities it offers was held. For many of the locals it was the first visual acquaintance with Belasitsa.



Figure 22 and Figure 23: The Photo exhibition in Kostinbrod, Bulgaria, December 2015

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

In total, more than 14,000 people visited the “The Incredible Belasitsa” photo exhibition during project implementation. It turned out to be one of the most attractive and successful promotion tools for the region. Due to its presentations many people got first impression of the mountain and its surroundings. Many people were impressed by the beauty, rich culture and history of the area. Furthermore, the exhibition built a common image of the International Belasitsa region as one intriguing and diverse location. A big number of the visitors were amazed to learn about the many sites of interest, natural beauty and historical importance in close distance. In this regard, the exhibition also helped the local communities living at the foothills of the mountain to learn about the neighbouring countries and start thinking of the area as one whole.

“The Incredible Belasitsa” photo exhibition will be used after the end of the project, too, to further promote Belasitsa.

4.2.6 Promotion tour for tour operators

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application

A three day tour will be organized for three selected specialized tour operators (one from each partner country), during which the participants will get to know the tourism supply and potential of the whole of Belasitsa.

Expected output/results are: Belasitsa included in the programmes of the three tour operators for the next year.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016)

The tour for tour operators was planned, organised and performed during the past reporting period. The tour was organized as one of the last activities of the project in order to ensure that the project team is best acquainted with the area and would be able to present all its assets to the tour operators’ representatives. On top of this the participants could observe the results of the project implementation and be assured that if they are to do trips to the area there is a working network of reliable partners at the site.

The preparation of tour started in September 2015 with choosing the participants. The project team contacted tour operators that are working in the field of eco-tourism and for whom organise nature friendly trips in the three countries. A short survey was done which of the organising a commercial tour to Belasitsa region afterwards seems to be feasible. On the basis of this the participants were chosen (Annex 60). There were representatives of two Bulgarian companies (Traventuria <http://traventuria.com/> and Zig-zag Holidays <http://www.zigzagbg.com/>) as well as two tourist services providers that organise local tours from Greece <http://www.ixnilatis.gr/> and from FYR Macedonia.



Figure 24: Visit to Iankish guest house, village of Samuilovo, Bulgaria

The agenda (Annex 61) of the tour included visits to the most notable tourist sites in international Belasitsa region together with meetings with tourist services providers from the area. The tour was organised in a way to suit the interest of a tour operator. The participants had sufficient time for discussions with the local tourist services providers, to get to know their facilities in terms of accommodation and food, capacity, additional services offered, prices and other details of interest. This way the tour was not only useful for the participants but also for the tourist services providers who learned what is expected from their side in order to start future cooperation. During the event, the participants had the chance to acquaint with the cultural and historical heritage of the mountain and experience the tasty Belasitsa cuisine.



Figure 25 and Figure 26: Restaurant Panorama, village of Mokrino, FYR Macedonia

Given that three days are too short to visit all notable sites and tourist services in the area, the most representative sites of Belasitsa were chosen to show the diversity of the region. Additionally, summarized information regarding the tourism opportunities in the three countries was presented to the participants in the tour. This was done by representatives of the project partners as each partner presented its own country.

At the end of the tour the participants were asked to fill in a specialised “Tourist Development and Future Opportunities Feedback Form” (Annex 62 and Annex 63). The form gave the project team very valuable information regarding the needed future intervention in the area.

Overview of the activities within the whole project duration and respective achievements

All tour operators stated that the International Belasitsa region has a clear potential for ecotourism activities. Two directions emerged as main threads to work along: mountain tourism with sportive target audience and secondly, cultural tourism with main emphasis on local cuisine. For the first group, major attractions in the area will be the panoramic main ridge of the Mountain, well preserved ancient forests as well as the waterfalls and the existing thematic tourist trails. Lake Kerkini in Greece is an important hotspot for nature lovers in the area and should be combined with other sites for the elaboration of attractive tourist products. Additionally the region is suitable for organising educational nature tours with school children too.

The major setback for nature friendly tourism development in Belasitsa region is the low popularity of the area due to lack of proper marketing up to now. There is a lack of direction signs both for the whole area and into it to the major sites. The region is not well marketed on the main road (E79). Despite the presence of the web sites of the project partners and the web portal www.belasitsa.com more and attractive actual information is needed as well as more active work on the social networks for promotion. This would require sufficient sources though, therefore, in this regard there is a clear need of a better mutual work with tour operators as well as participation in tourist fairs, exchanges and other similar events.

As a result of the tour the representative of Traventuria stated that his company will start a commercial tour to Belasitsa in 2016.



Figure 27: Discussion at Lake Kerkini National Park visitor centre, Greece

4.2.7 International forum – Closing Workshop

Summary of project activity as foreseen in project application

The international forum will be organized as a one day closing conference of the project. The main aim of the closing event will be to share and analyse what has been achieved during the project implementation, as well as to discuss how partners could continue their work in relation to nature protection and sustainable development in Belasitsa region in the three countries. Additionally, good practices for branding of ecotourism destinations in other areas will be presented (e.g. Viabono). Partners will sign a Memorandum of Understanding for future cooperation on biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. Also other stakeholders will be invited to sign the official document. The closing event is planned to be a starting point for the partners for their future joint collaboration.

Expected output/results are: Memorandum of Understanding for future cooperation signed; documentation of the conference including future ideas of cooperation in the Belasitsa region.

Activities implemented in the final reporting period (July 2015 to September 2016) and respective achievements

The preparation for the closing workshop started in August 2015. BBF team in close cooperation with all project partners developed a preliminary agenda and the event was scheduled for the beginning of November. It was decided that the event will be held in the village of Kolarovo, Bulgaria, as this is a good option for all partners due to its central location in the area. The workshop was hosted by Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate. It was planned that apart from the local participants from Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia there will be guest speakers from Germany who can share good examples of how nature protection and sustainable development can work for the benefit of the society especially in trans-border regions similar to Belasitsa. The team of EuroNatur got in touch with tourism experts and people

working in field of sustainable tourism and nature protection and suggested a list of suitable speakers. After discussion the project team was happy to welcome Mrs. Anja Domnick, Common Wadden Sea Secretariat and Mrs. Maly-Wischhof, freelance expert in sustainable tourism at the venue. Both of them had very intriguing and useful presentations during the event. In order to let them prepare well and get to know Belasitsa a short description of the tourism development in the international region was prepared (Annex 64). Both guest speakers had focused their presentations very usefully for Belasitsa conditions. They presented advantages and opportunities of the work in trans-border areas, possible marketing approaches for attracting visitors and recommendations for the future development of international Belasitsa region. It was very useful that the two experts had time to discuss the situation in Belasitsa with the Project Team in advance of the workshop.

The main part of the agenda (Annex 65) consisted of presentations of all project partners describing the implementation and the results of the project. Additionally there was a presentation regarding the biosphere reserves and the opportunities they offer. The project coordinator from EuroNatur presented opportunities for Belasitsa as part of the European Green Belt.

There were 36 participants (Annex 66 and Annex 67) at the event. Representatives of all project partners were present together with representatives of local municipalities, tourist services providers from the International Belasitsa region, local people from Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia.

All presentations were well accepted and provoked interest in the audience. Many of them finished with discussions regarding the future of the International Belasitsa region. The whole event has been characterised by mutual understanding and positive spirit. People from different countries with different background and interest were supportive to continuation of the work for sustainable development based on the preserved nature of the whole International Belasitsa region.



Figure 28 and Figure 29: Presentations during the closing workshop, Kolarovo, Bulgaria



Figure 30: Miss Sandra Wigger, EuroNatur presenting

As all local project partners wished to continue their common work in the area, part of the preparation of the closing workshop was the preparation of a Memorandum of Understanding (Annex 68). The document is an official declaration of the intention to collaborate in the field of environment protection and sustainable development of the International Belasitsa region on the territories of the three states. The Memorandum was elaborated in advance consulted with all the parties and signed at the event. The Memorandum is signed by Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation – Belasitsa Branch, Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate (Bulgaria), Management authority of Lake Kerkini (Greece) and EA Planetum – Strumica (FYR Macedonia).

This fact once again confirmed the good collaboration the project partners had during the project implementation and stated a very positive outlook for the future. This is the first time in the history of the International Belasitsa region that partners from all three states work together towards sustainable development and building of a common image of the whole region.



Figure 31: All local project partner sign the Memorandum of Understanding

5 Communication

Communication within the Project Team

During project implementation, the communication within the project team was going on mainly via e-mail and phone/Skype and occasional personal meetings. There are regular meetings among representatives of BBF– Belasitsa Branch and Belasitsa Nature Park (Bulgaria) as well as meetings of BBF– Belasitsa Branch and EA Planetum mainly due to issues connected with the interpretative trail. The team of BBF visited the site of the trail few times and the project manager had special appointment with the major of Strumica regarding the financing needed on the behalf of Strumi Municipality. There have been few meetings of representatives of BBF– Belasitsa Branch with the partners from Lake Kerkin National Park Management Authority. The whole project team gathered at the closing workshop in Bulgaria on 3rd November 2015 which was one more occasion to discuss operational issues on the project implementation.

In December 2015, there was a meeting of the international project team with the participation of representatives of BBF– Belasitsa Branch, EA Planetum and Lake Kerkin National Park Management Authority held in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. The main topics discussed at the meeting were revision of the activities implemented in 2015, elaboration of the interpretative trail in FYR Macedonia, preparation of the final report and future work in Belasitsa International Region. The agenda of the meeting is attached in Annex 69 to the current report.

There has been mutual understanding, clear responsibilities and clear division of roles within the project team. All members of team have been working together for a long time now and the communication was going smoothly. The atmosphere in the team was constructive and open. All common project products were consulted and agreed on by all project partners in the course of their elaboration. More and more often the project partners were communicating on issues different from the project implementation, sharing information, discussing opportunities for future work and keeping in constant contact.

The team of BBF– Belasitsa Branch was in constant contact with EuroNatur project coordinator as well. The communication was going on via e-mail and regular teleconferences. EuroNatur team received up to date feedback on project implementation on regular basis and helped the local project team with consultancy and guidelines. During the reporting period there has been a change in the EuroNatur project coordinator: Miss Sandra Wigger took over the position from Miss Anne Katrin Heinrichs due to maternity leave. Miss Wigger visited the project area at the closing workshop which was an opportunity to get to know all members of the project team in person and discuss actual issues.

It can be summarised that the communication within the project team throughout the implementation of the project has always been on a good level allowing proper implementation of all activities. It can be noted that there has been an improvement in communication after the first project year due to the fact that all project members became better acquainted with each other and everyone's personal style of working. At the end of this three year project it can be clearly stated that all project partners were glad to work together and they are strongly willing to continue in the future too. The good collaboration among the project team members is a good

example for all other actors in the area how practical and beneficial is to work together for the whole International Belasitsa region.

Communication of the project implementation and results

During the course of the project, active communication between the project team and the media and different stakeholders in the area continued. All project activities and results were made visible to the public and specific target groups.

Additionally, BBF – Belasitsa Branch was keeping close contacts to the local and regional press in order to raise attention for the project activities. For the total project duration there have been 56 press releases (Annex 71), five radio interviews, three TV interviews and numerous meetings and discussions.

The photo exhibition “The Incredible Belasitsa” visited four different locations in Bulgaria and attracted more than 10.000 visitors only for the reporting period and more than 14.000 people during the project duration.

The 3rd Youth Camp in FYR Macedonia and the closing workshop in Bulgaria additionally contributed to information distribution on national and international scale.

Within the course of the project money from different budget lines could be saved. The remaining budget enabled the production of a brochure about Belasitsa region on one hand and the most relevant project outcomes – mainly in relation to tourist development - on the other hand. The brochure is available for download on the website of EuroNatur¹; additionally, it is distributed in the region through BBF Branch Belasitsa, EA Planetum, the Belasitsa Nature Park, and Lake Kerkini National Park Management Authority as well as tourist services providers in the region.

Information regarding all project events was published on the web-portal www.belasitsa.com as well as distributed in the form of press releases. All this contributed considerably not only to the better communication of the project results but as well as to building of a common image for the International Belasitsa region. Overall communication of the project results throughout the project implementation was done like a joint effort of the project team under the guidance of BBF – Belasitsa Branch.

1

https://www.euronatur.org/fileadmin/docs/projekte/Belasitsa_Transboundery_Cooperation_2016.pdf and
https://www.euronatur.org/fileadmin/docs/projekte/Belasitsa_Discover_Belasitas_Treasures_2016.pdf

6 Discussion and outlook

Overall the project was implemented in its full extent as originally planned. The project implementation considerably contributed to joint long-term conservation and promotion of the unique biodiversity of the transboundary Belasitsa Mountains. The activities were fulfilled on the territory of all three countries Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia sharing the mountain as well as in Germany. More than 350 people were directly involved in the project activities, more than 14,000 people visited the “The Incredible Belasitsa” photo exhibition. Twenty nine separate events were organized and performed within the project duration. All this points out the impact had and has in and for the area. The project implementation led to improved partnerships in the region, promoted sustainable and nature friendly economic development and increased public awareness of the values of Belasitsa.

Develop international partnership for the conservation of Belasitsa, including exchange of know-how and capacity building.

Partnership among the project team organizations

Within the period of project implementation, the previous good basis for cooperation was further developed towards a well-established working partnership. Numerous project activities were implemented jointly by the partner organisation in close and trustful cooperation. Any project activity involved more than one organization which required a lot of communication and cooperation, leading to a well working cooperation among all project partners, including both governmental (GO) and non-governmental institutions (NGO). This can be considered as a real achievement in such trans-border, multicultural and multilingual area. Also, most of the project outcomes are a result of common work, e.g. the students’ diploma theses, the joint catalogue of ecotourism services and products, the list of necessary interventions (Annex 72), the joint multilingual image brochure, information boards and the nature information (interpretative) trail in the FYR Macedonia.

All partners expressed their strong will to continue the joint work in the future by signing the Memorandum of Understanding at the closing workshop in November 2015. Furthermore, since December 2015 the four organisations involved in the project implementation started developing three new joint project proposals under INTEREG programmes aiming at future conservation and promotion of the International Belasitsa region.

Partnership among participants in project activities

During the project implementation many of the participants met people with similar interests, background or challenges from the respective neighbouring countries. Many of the participants in the student exchange are still in constant contact. One of the students who took part in the event is now part of the team of BBF in Bulgaria.

The trainings for tourist services providers enabled the participants to exchange experience and demonstrated possible ways for future development of their businesses. At present, most of the tourist services providers from the whole region in the three countries already know each other, their businesses and all the tourist opportunities Belasitsa has to offer. The tourist services providers have the contacts of their colleagues in the trans-border region and can contact them

if needed. Furthermore, many of the tourist services providers made new useful contacts with the project team organisations, participants in the tour for tour operators, experts and local people. Representatives of the local municipalities and non-governmental organization also made useful connection by participating in different project activities.

Exchange of know-how and capacity building

During the project implementation, many chances both for the project team and the participants to exchange know-how and raise their capacity emerged. At the three exchanges 17 tourist services providers from the area visited the neighbouring countries with the particular goal of know-how exchange. All 92 participants in the training courses had the chance of enriching their knowledge and skills in operating sustainable nature-friendly tourism business. The members of the project team who participated in the study tour in Germany also learned and experience new approaches and in the field of nature protection and sustainable tourism development. Part of this experience has been passed to the participants in the other project events later on. The training for nature guides not only increased the personal capacity of the 16 participants but is also an advantage to the whole trans-boundary region.

The project contributed to the establishment of a network of tourist services providers which forms the basis for further development of nature-friendly tourism in Belasitsa Mountain.

Promote benefits of economic development measures (e.g. ecotourism) as a long term tool for nature protection.

Promoting the above was included in most of the project events as well as in personal and work meetings and many of the project products, e.g. the students' diploma theses, the joint catalogue of ecotourism services and products, the joint multilingual image brochure, information boards, the nature information (interpretative) trail and others. Most of the topics and presentation at any of the training courses for key players in ecotourism were focused particularly on promotion of sustainable nature friendly development. The participants in the exchanges for tourist service providers, international youth and learning camps, student exchange, training of nature guides got acquainted with the issue as well. The training for nature guides not only produced future interpreters but showed another means of enriching and improving the tourist products offered and raised awareness for the tourist potential of the area.

The web-portal www.belasitsa.com can be considered as an invaluable tool in this regard, especially with the updated and enriched information uploaded as a result of the project.

Due to the exchange of experience and numerous presentations of good practices in the field of ecotourism during project implementation, awareness among many of the direct beneficiaries of the project was significantly raised concerning the (economic) potential of nature based tourism.

Raise general public awareness of the values of Belasitsa as unique nature site

One of the primary objectives of the project was to raise public awareness of international Belasitsa region as a location with many values.

Due to the work of the project team addressing different stakeholders and target audiences in the region, awareness of the local people regarding the natural values and tourist potential of the region was continuously raised. Trainings, exchanges and diploma theses in line with all the information materials produced made many of the locals realise the value of Belasitsa's nature. The popularity of the region is growing also as a result of the photo contest: the photo exhibition "The Incredible Belasitsa" was visited by more than 14,000 people at eight different locations in the three countries. The enriched web portal www.belasitsa.com, "Winter Belasitsa" and other events connected with the project implementation also contributed to its risen popularity. The 56 press releases distributed to the media in Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia, five radio interviews, three TV interviews and numerous meetings and discussions with journalists also played a role in building awareness both of locals and the wider public. A proof for the increased popularity of the region is the appearance of new tourist facilities in the area during the last two years. Alone in the village of Kolarovo (Bulgaria), two new hotels started operating together with a winery open for visitors. A new guest house opened doors in the village of Smolari (FYR Macedonia).

A very important project result is the creation of a common image of the international Belasitsa region. Before the start of the current project only few people regarded Belasitsa as "one", but thought of it as an area divided by borders and as part of three countries. By continuously and consistently promoting Belasitsa as one area rather than pointing out national borders during project implementation, perception of locals and tourist service providers has significantly changed. Today, the area is regarded as a common area, not taking into account the respective country as much as formerly. One can easily hear local tourist services providers speaking of the advantages the international region brings and without relying solely on what a single country offers.

There are several encouraging signs in this regard. The annual international bike tour of Belasitsa organised by local bike club in Petrich (Bulgaria) registered an increase from 60 to 250 participants for the last three years. Nowadays, there are ideas of creation of international tourist hikes, adventure races and an international trail running event on the mountain side. This change happened due to the chance the people had to experience the whole of the mountain as well as to meet and communicate with their neighbours and to understand that a common Belasitsa offers many advantages both for local people and visitors. An important step forward in building a common image of the international region was the elaboration and distribution of the Joint catalogue of ecotourism services and products which is the first occasion in the history of the area when tourist services and attractions from the whole international region are gathered in one publication.

Probably the most important outcome of the Belasitsa Beyond Borders project implementation is bringing people together. Thanks to all project events and products, thanks to mutual work with partners from different countries we managed to bring tourist services providers, governmental and non-governmental organisations and local people together. They are unified by the beautiful Belasitsa Mountain and by their common ideas for the future development of the region.

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