



BEECH FORESTS ALONG THE GREEN BELT ALBANIA

INTRODUCTION

In Albania, due to less intensive land-use in the border areas during recent decades, a significant biological diversity has been preserved in most parts. Today, the terrestrial border area of Albania is part of the ecological network **European Green Belt**.

From June 2015 until July 2017, EuroNatur Foundation and PPNEA (Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania) jointly implemented

the project **“Nature Conservation and Sustainable Development at the Green Belt Albania”**. The project was financially supported by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) with funding from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety. The main purpose of the project was to achieve a contribution to the protection of biodiversity and sustainable rural development in two protected areas along the Albanian Green Belt:

- The **core zone Rajca of the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park** in the southeastern part of Albania at the border to FYR Macedonia,
- The **Strict Nature Reserve Lumi i Gashit** in the planned National Park Albanian Alps in the northern part of Albania at the border to Kosovo and Montenegro.

Both areas are ecological treasures characterized by impressive mountains with the most relevant remnants of **primeval beech forests** in Albania. Virgin beech forests provide habitats for over 10'000 species, but in whole Europe only few ancient forests still exist. Therefore, the remnants in Albania deserve special attention. Both areas are part of the UNESCO World Nature Heritage “Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe” since July 2017.

Main focus within the project was put on the implementation of **pilot projects** by local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the two project areas along the Green Belt Albania (see above). The pilot projects aim at connecting the improvement

of the current conservation management with the living conditions of the local population by means of an environmentally friendly rural development. Furthermore, the approach demonstrates the importance to maintain a functional ecosystem and its services related to human wellbeing through environmental protection. Implementing agencies were local CSOs, as they play an important role in nature conservation on site level, additionally, they are a key factor to secure public participation and thus ensure acceptance of nature conservation measures. Chapter three of the publication gives an insight in the implemented pilot projects and its participatory approach.

The two projects sites are highlights along the Balkan Green Belt, due to the fact that they still contain virgin beech forest areas. These impressive areas are home to many animal and plant species, which depend on old grown trees and deadwood. It is important to ensure the protection of these forests, but at the same time, not to forget about the people living in the surrounding areas. Through the implemented pilot projects we show possibilities to combine nature conservation and the improvement of livelihood of the local people.

The designation of Rajca and Lumi i Gashit as UNESCO World Nature Heritage as part of an all-European network for the protection of ancient beech forests means great international acknowledgement. But it is also connected with an increased responsibility of Albania to effectively protect the sites and their natural processes. Additionally, the designation offers opportunities for the local population in terms of the development of small-scaled nature-based tourism.

In the last decades the national interest in the protection of the virgin beech forests in Albania with its natural values and high biodiversity has been reflected in proclaiming Rajca and Lumi i Gashit as strict nature reserves. After the '90s due to the hard economic situation, these forest sites were affected by unsustainable forest use in the surrounding areas, but the current policy reflects an increased conservation effort. In addition, the implemented pilot projects contribute to the enhancement of protection of the beech forests along the Albanian Green Belt and support a nature friendly development of the area.

HYRJE

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Për shkak të përdorimit më pak intensiv të tokës në zonat kufitare të Shqipërisë gjatë dekadave të fundit është ruajtur një larmi biologjike e konsiderueshme. Sot zona kufitare tokësore e Shqipërisë është pjesë e rrjetit ekologjik të **Brezit të Gjelbër European**.

Nga qershori 2015 deri në korrik 2017, Fondacioni EuroNatur dhe PPNEA (Shoqata për Mbrojtjen dhe Ruajtjen e Mjedisit Natyror në Shqipëri) realizuan së bashku projektin **“Ruajtja e Natyrës dhe Zhvillimi**

i Qëndrueshëm në Brezin e Gjelbër në Shqipëri”.

Projekti u mbështet financiarisht nga Agjencia Federale Gjermane për Mbrojtjen e Natyrës (BfN) me fonde nga Ministria Federale Gjermane për Mjedisin, Ruajtjen e Natyrës, Ndërtimin dhe Sigurinë Bërthamore. Qëllimi kryesor i projektit ishte të siguronte një kontribut në mbrojtjen e biodiversitetit dhe zhvillimin e qëndrueshëm rural në dy zona të mbrojtura përgjatë Brezit të Gjelbër Shqiptar:

- **Zona qendrore Rrajcë e Parkut Kombëtar Shebenik-Jabllanicës** në pjesën juglindore të Shqipërisë në kufi me IRJ të Maqedonisë,
- **Rezerva Strikte Natyrore Lumi i Gashit**, Parku Kombëtar i Alpeve Shqiptare (në proces shpalljeje) në pjesën veriore të Shqipërisë në kufirin me Kosovën dhe Malin e Zi.

Të dyja këto zona janë thesare ekologjike që karakterizohen nga malet mbresëlënëse me pasuri të rëndësishme si pyjet e virgjër të ahut në Shqipëri. Pyjet e virgjër të ahut ofrojnë habitate për mbi 10'000 specie, ndërkohë që në Evropë ekzistojnë vetëm disa zona të tilla të lashta. Prandaj, këto pyje në Shqipëri meritojnë vëmendje të veçantë.

Në kuadër të projektit fokusi kryesor u vu në zbatimin e **projekteve pilot** nga organizatat lokale të shoqërisë civile (OSHC) në dy zonat e projektit përgjatë Brezit të Gjelbër në Shqipëri (shih më lart). Projektet pilot synojnë të lidhin përmirësimin dhe menaxhimin aktual të ruajtjes së natyrës me kushtet

e jetesës së popullatës lokale me anë të një zhvillimi rural rural miqësor. Për më tepër, qasja demonstroi rëndësinë për të ruajtur funksionimin normal të ekosistemeve dhe shërbimet e tyre të lidhura me mirëqenien humane përmes mbrojtjes së mjedisit. Njësitë zbatuese ishin OSHC-të lokale, pasi ato luajnë një rol të rëndësishëm në ruajtjen e natyrës në nivel lokal dhe përveç kësaj ato janë një faktor kyç për të siguruar pjesëmarrjen e publikut dhe për rrjedhojë të sigurojnë pranimin e masave për ruajtjen e natyrës. Kapitulli i tretë i botimit jep një pasqyrë të projekteve pilot të zbatuara dhe qasjet me pjesëmarrje.

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1 FROM IRON CURTAIN TO EUROPEAN GREEN BELT



The boundary division between Eastern and Western Europe from the end of World War II in 1945 up until 1989 was called “**The Iron Curtain**” – physical in form of border defenses between the countries of Europe. For almost five decades this line was a symbol of the political and ideological divisions between the European powers. Most of the areas along the Iron Curtain were a closed zone where no or very few human activity was allowed. The only positive outcome of this strongly guarded borderline has been the preservation of some of the most important habitats for biodiversity of almost all of Europe’s biogeographical regions.

Today the former Iron Curtain line - including the whole terrestrial border of Albania – is called the **European Green Belt**. It spans along 24 country borders, running for about 12’500 km from the northern tip of Europe through the former inner German border on to the Black, Ionian and Adriatic Seas.

The European Green Belt symbolizes the pan-European effort for joint cross-border cooperation and activities in nature conservation and sustainable development. The project referred to in this publication is being conducted in order to help achieving the vision of the European Green Belt Initiative:

The European Green Belt, our shared natural heritage along the line of the former Iron Curtain, is to be conserved and restored as an ecological network connecting high-value natural and cultural landscapes while respecting the economic, social and cultural needs of local communities.

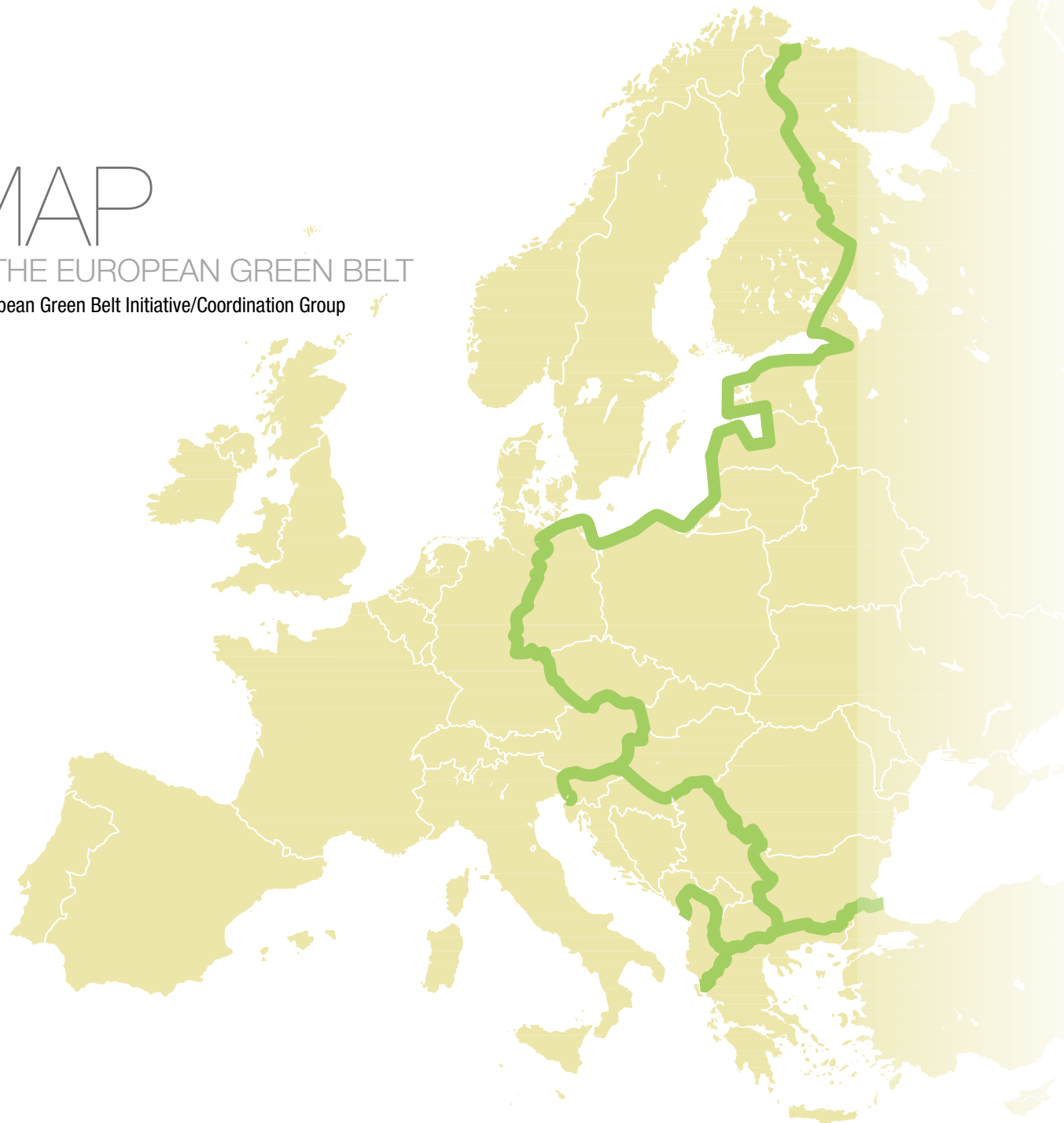
The European Green Belt Initiative is made up of four organizational regions: Fennoscandia, the Baltic Region, Central Europe and the Balkans. The overall steering of the initiative is carried out by the European Green Belt Association since September 2014, consisting of governmental as well as non-governmental organizations from all regions. Each section is coordinated regionally – currently EuroNatur is acting as regional coordinator for the Balkan Green Belt. Each country appoints a formal representative as “National Green Belt Focal Point”. In case of Albania the Ministry of Environment holds this position. In addition, the Ministry of Environment Albania is member of the European Green Belt Association since the foundation of the association on 24th September 2014. Since January 2017, it is also board member of the European Green Belt Association, representing the Balkan region. The same applies to the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) who supported the Initiative since the early 2000s: The BfN holds the position of the National Focal Point in Germany and is a member of the European Green Belt Association as well as board member since 2014.



MAP

OF THE EUROPEAN GREEN BELT

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The region of the **Balkan Green Belt** spans along the border of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo¹, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey and Romania and is a hot spot of biodiversity and endemism. Predominantly located in the mountain ranges of the Balkan Peninsula, it forms an extremely heterogeneous mosaic of natural landscapes, including pristine alpine ecosystems and forests. Steppe habitats, lakes and coastal zones complement the picture. The region also includes extraordinary cultural landscapes that are home to a multitude of threatened plant and animal species.

The **Albanian Green Belt** is a particularity for the European Green Belt: Due to Albania's recent history, today the entire terrestrial border of the country is part of the European Green Belt. The Albanian regime during the Cold War operated a policy of isolation between 1970 and 1991. During this time the border areas - called "Kloni" - were completely closed or with limited access only for a strip of at least 13 km from the border line inland. The border itself was

secured with wire fences (Dervishi 2008). Due to this low access, the areas are mainly well preserved today, some areas still being without or with very little human interference. Consequently, they survived as more or less natural ecosystems with respectively high ecological values. Until the late 1990s almost all structures of the border fences were destroyed, partly also by locals.

The Albanian Green Belt includes landscapes with high nature value like the lakes Shkodra, Ohrid and Prespa as well as the mountainous landscapes of the Albanian Alps, Korab-Koritnik and Shebenik-Jabllanica.

This publication focuses on the unique areas in the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park in the southeast of Albania and the planned National Park Albanian Alps in the northern part of the country. Both areas are ecological treasures characterized by impressive mountains with the most relevant remnants of primeval beech forests in Albania.

2 BEECH FORESTS ALONG THE EUROPEAN GREEN BELT

This chapter illustrates the natural values and importance of European beech forests in general and especially in Albania with focus on the two project areas Rrajca in the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park and the Strict Nature Reserve Lumi I Gashit. Furthermore, the recent development regarding the UNESCO World Nature Heritage site for primeval beech forests in Europe is described.

2.1 EUROPEAN BEECH IN GENERAL

After the beech forests survived the last glacial period in form of small clusters in South and Southeast Europe only, it successively re-colonized again large parts of the continent. Today, the European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is still found in large parts of Europe. The dominance occurred over the last 4'000 years in a wide range of countries from the coasts of western North Europe to major European mountain massifs in the South (Knapp et al. 2013). The genus of beech

(*Fagus species pluralis*) is one of the most important elements of forests in the Temperate Broad-leaf Forest Biome and represents an outstanding example of the re-colonization and development of terrestrial ecosystems and communities after the last ice age, a process which is still ongoing (whc.unesco.org). The beech tree owes its competitiveness mostly to its shade tolerance, which is characterized by the growth rate being flexibly adapted to the light conditions based on leaf morphology, sprout length as well as branching type. In addition, beechnuts are able to survive in the shade of the understory for more than 200 years (Peters 1997).

However, only a few remnants of virgin and ancient beech forests still exist in whole Europe. Primeval beech forests provide natural habitats for more than 10'000 species of animal, plant and fungi - among them dozens of important plant species listed in international conventions and EU Directives as well as included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants.



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2.2 EUROPEAN BEECH IN ALBANIA

Beech forests in Albania belong to the Moesian-Balkan Beech Forest Region which covers Southeastern Europe. It is characterized by glacial refugia of *Fagus sylvatica*, transitional forms (*Fagus moesiaca* towards *Fagus orientalis* with intra-species diversity) as well as endemic beech forest types with presumably even areas with ancient forests (Knapp et al. 2013). In the 1920s, beech forests still covered large parts of Albania (Dengler 1931, Markgraf 1927, 1931, 1932). During the communist period (1944-1990) the Albanian forestry exploited many virgin forests for commercial use and reforested the areas for example with Black pine (*Pinus nigra*) and black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). Especially in the 1980s, the forests in Albania were overused due to the economic isolation of the country and the related need for self-supply with fire wood and timber. After the changes of the political situation in Albania, exploitation of beech

forests continued by unspecialized small businesses using mostly clear cutting and other not sustainable practices (Tabaku and Luarasi 2011, Tabaku 2012).

The current beech forest cover in Albania is estimated to be approximately 150'000 ha, with ancient and virgin forests almost completely altered (Knapp et al. 2013). The most relevant remnants of primeval beech forests in entire Albania are located in the two project sites Lumi I Gashit and Rrajca. Their remoteness, difficult access due to lack of road infrastructure and the location of both areas in the former border exclusion zone of the Iron Curtain are the main reasons why the forests of the areas were not heavily impacted and even patches of virgin forests could survive. The following sub-chapters describe both areas in detail.

LUMI I GASHIT (ALBANIAN ALPS)

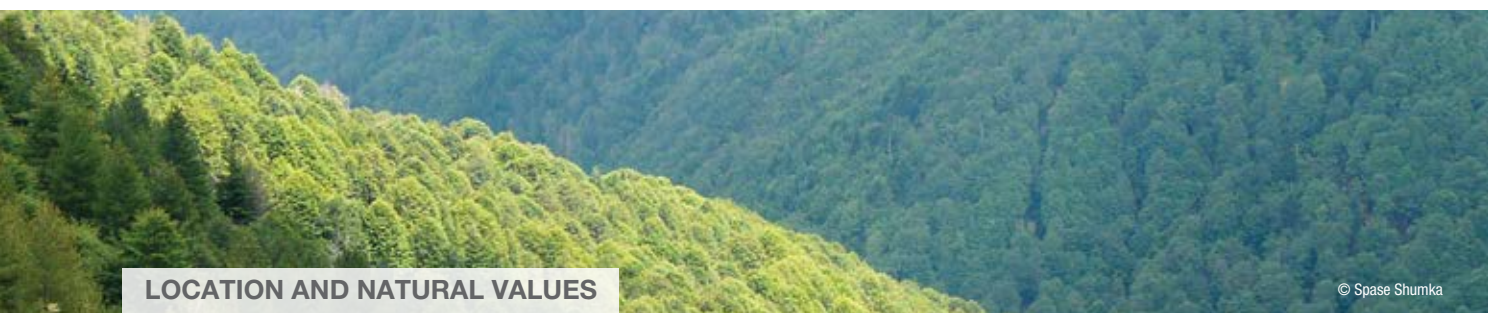


PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT

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The Strict Nature Reserve Lumi i Gashit (IUCN-Category I) with a surface of around 3'000 ha was designated on 15.01.1996. It belongs to one of the first three established Strict Nature Reserves in Albania. It is part of the Bjeshket e Nemuna Mountains – also known as Albanian Alps - and is located in the very Northeast of

Albania in the border zone with Montenegro and Kosovo in the area of the European Green Belt. Towards the east, the Strict Nature Reserve borders with the National Park “Lugiina e Valbones”, which was designated as well in 1996. The area is managed by the Regional Agency of Protected Areas (RAPA) Kukes.



LOCATION AND NATURAL VALUES

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The reserve covers the upper catchment area of the mountain river Lumi i Gashit including its source and its partly temporary tributaries. The reserve includes different elevation zones from 1'000 m above sea level (asl) at river level up to 1'900 m asl at the watershed along the eastern border of the mountain. It is characterized by different vegetation complexes including lower mountain forests up to alpine rocks. Beech forests are covering approximately one third of the Strict Nature Reserve (around 1'000 ha). The inclusion of a Bosnian pine (*Pinus heldreichii*) rocky forest in the beech forest belt as well as the joint occurrence of European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*)

and Macedonian pine (*Pinus peuce*) in large stands of high integrity are a remarkable unique feature of tremendous natural value. A special feature of the area is also that beech forests form the tree line in elevations higher than 1'700 m. In remote areas on steep slopes, primeval forest remnants with an average age of around two centuries survived. The area Lumi i Gashit harbors almost the complete range of fauna species existing in the Albanian Alps. The area hosts more than a hundred birds species, most important of which are: Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) and Hazel Grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*).



HUMAN INFLUENCE

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Due to its remote location, the forest area remained undisturbed for a long period of time and was not impacted by human and forest management. Today, alpine farming with cattle and sheep takes place on high mountain pastures and shepherds live all summer in the high mountain valleys. In sufficient distance to the wilderness area, wood is cut to

be used as firewood and timber while the (forest) wilderness area remains undisturbed. In some parts due to overgrazing natural regeneration of trees is hindered which led to degraded and eroded areas. The current grazing pressure in the surrounding of the nature reserve is considered to be the strongest threat to the protected area.

RRAJCA

(SHEBENIK-JABLLANICA NATIONAL PARK)



PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT

The Shebenik mountain range is located in the south-eastern part of Albania at the border to FYR Macedonia in the area of the European Green Belt. The forest of Rrajca is located in the upper Bustrica valley and was designated as Strict Nature Reserve in 1996.

Today it covers 2'130 ha and forms one of the core zones of the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park, which was established on 21.05.2008 (IUCN Category II). The Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park is administered by the RAPA Librazhd.



LOCATION AND NATURAL VALUES

The altitude of Rrajca ranges between 700 and 2'000 m asl around the Bustrica mountain river with its source below the peak of Shebenik (2'250 m). On the steep slopes, areas higher than approximately 1'230 m on both sides of the Bustrica valley and their tributaries are covered by a dense, old and virgin, old and virgin beech forest which remained unaffected by human influences and forms the tree line. The average age of this part is 180 years. Beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica*) grow in mixture with European silver

fir (*Abies alba*), Macedonian pine (*Pinus peuce*), and whitebeam (*Sorbus cf. aria*). The rich occurrence of the Balkan endemic *Pinus peuce* at the upper tree line as well as within the beech forest where it forms mixed stands with beech is to be pointed out as an important particularity and a unique feature of this site. The ecological integrity of the area is also expressed by high deadwood share and by the occurrence of virgin forest indicators like lichen *Lobaria pulmonata*, which is growing on the stems of old beech trees.



HUMAN INFLUENCE

Till the 1990s some 45'000 sheep were grazing in the area of the current National Park, mainly on the summer pastures above the forest belt. Today still some 6'000 sheep are estimated to use these summer pastures. Below the peak Kisha e Bardhe (1'396 m) the former beech forest is heavily impacted due to

grazing and pollarding and in some parts the forest is completely replaced by fenced meadows.

With increasing distance to the last settlement the human impact is decreasing significantly. After two hours walking distance hardly any human land use impact can be found.

2.3 UNESCO WORLD NATURE HERITAGE



According to the UNESCO it is important to protect all different types of primeval beech forests reflecting the wide spectrum of different biogeographical, edaphic, climatic and topographic conditions and the high variability of this forest type as well as including all significant glacial refuges (whc.unesco.org).

In 2007, UNESCO had inscribed a number of primeval beech forests in the Carpathians (Ukraine, Slovakia) as UNESCO World Nature Heritage site. This list was extended in 2011 with beech forests in Germany (whc.unesco.org). In 2012, an international project funded by the German Ministry of Environment was launched to identify further ancient beech forests in Europe to complete the UNESCO World Nature Heritage site. The Albanian Ministry of Environment supported and participated in this process and in February 2016 the government of Albania confirmed the nomination of the two areas Rrajca and Lumi i Gashit as UNESCO World Nature Heritage by official signature. Both areas have a significant importance regarding the protection of beech forests in Europe.

During the annual session of the World Heritage Committee in July 2017, ancient and primeval beech forests in 10 European countries covering a property of 58'353.04 ha were added to the UNESCO World Heritage site "Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and the Ancient Beech Forests of Germany" – among them the two areas described above in Albania. This site was renamed to "Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions in Europe" and now includes beech forest stands from 12 countries in Europe (whc.unesco.org). The areas complement the World Natural Heritage site and contribute to forest continuity and regenerative potential.

The inscription as part of the UNESCO World Nature Heritage site of both project areas is also an opportunity for the future management and sustainable development of these regions. The pilot projects implemented and later on presented in this publication are best practice examples illustrating the combination of the improvement of the forest protection and the improvement of the living conditions of the locals at the same time (see chapter 3).



UNESCO World Heritage

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention was adopted in 1972 as an international instrument for the protection of globally unique cultural and natural sites. As world nature heritage site only areas which demonstrate an outstanding universal value, integrity and proper management can be selected. Currently (July 2017) the UNESCO World Heritage List includes only 206 UNESCO World Nature Heritage sites worldwide (whc.unesco.org).

3

PILOT PROJECTS ALONG THE ALBANIAN GREEN BELT

Besides the intrinsic conservation value of the forests in the Albanian Alps as well as Shebenik-Jabllanica, both areas play a significant role for the local economy in many ways, e.g. for producing timber, wood for fuel, various non-timber forest products as well as offering room for outdoor recreation and tourism opportunities. They also support ecosystem services related to human wellbeing as well as the maintenance of the health of other ecosystems, like aquatic ecosystems and farmlands. Forests provide invaluable ecosystem

services among others protecting the soil from erosion, contributing to soil formation and facilitating aquifer recharge. Therefore, an important aspect of long term conservation of both areas is the sustainable use of the communal forests, excluding the ancient beech forest areas which need to be surrounded by a sufficiently wide buffer zone. This approach is also reflected by the European Green Belt Initiative aiming to harmonize human socio-economic development with the protection of the natural environment.



Another important pillar for the protection is the presence of active local organizations focused on nature conservation. In many countries in Southeastern Europe state agencies for nature conservation lack financial resources while economic development is being pushed. The fact that smart nature conservation approaches can foster sustainable development and economic stability at the same time is not well

known. Consequently, nature conservation activities are implemented to a small extent and in many cases with insufficient public participation. In this context, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) focusing on nature conservation play an important role to implement best practice examples for nature conservation and sustainable development benefitting both nature and people and thus initiate rethinking.



The main component of the project “Nature Conservation and Sustainable Development at the Green Belt Albania” is the implementation of pilot projects in the National Park Shebenik-Jabllanica and the Albanian Alps by local CSOs with the support of EuroNatur, PPNEA and the respective Regional Agency of Protected Areas (RAPA). The pilot projects aim to improve both the conservation management as well as the live-

lihood of the local population in the two project areas through rural, environmentally friendly development.

The following sub-chapters provide an overview of the experience of EuroNatur and PPNEA to conduct pilot projects as well as of the chosen approach. In addition, all pilot projects implemented in the frame of this project are presented.

3.1

EXPERIENCES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SMALL GRANT PROJECTS

From 2007 to 2015 PPNEA, with support of EuroNatur, implemented 20 small grant projects focused mainly in the northern area of the Shebenik-Jabllanica

National Park in the frame of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP).



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SMALL GRANT PROJECTS IN THE FRAME OF THE BLRP FOCUSED ON THE FOLLOWING TOPICS:

- Education and increased advocacy on environmental issues, with focus on schools;
- Capacity building and institutional strengthening of local CSOs;
- Increasing engagement of local CSOs in different activities related to nature conservation and promotion of medicinal plants;
- Strengthening the role of women in society, education, tourism promotion and nature conservation.

In general, small grant projects are an important tool to improve nature conservation and social welfare on local level and therefore were chosen as main activity in the project “Nature Conservation and Sustainable Development at the Green Belt Albania”. The previous knowledge was used to develop the current approach of

the pilot projects implemented in the frame of this project.

The conclusions and recommendations regarding the implementation of small grant projects including the previous as well as new gained experiences are listed in the last sub-chapter.

3.2

THE APPROACH TO DEVELOP AND IDENTIFY SUITABLE PILOT PROJECTS

Based on experiences in previous projects, a **participative approach** was chosen for the development of pilot projects. Main aspect for identification and – in a second step – improvement of the current situation for both nature and locals in a specific area is to seek dialogue with the respective inhabitants. To successfully cooperate with locals, it is important to better understand their views on nature conservation and the consequences certain measures have for them.

Therefore it is of utmost importance to involve locals in order to gain acceptance of measures for nature conservation as well as to guarantee support of and identification with such, in the development and design of possible solutions. In addition, regional identity and emotional attachment with the area as well as knowledge about ecosystem services are important pillars to build and increase the will to protect nature (Spangenberg et al. 2015).



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Besides involvement of the local population, collaboration with governmental entities responsible for the development/management of the target area, i.e. administrations of protected areas, is an essential prerequisite to secure the long term effect of the pilot projects and to stimulate further efforts of nature conservation. The pilot projects shall be not only compatible, but support the management plan of the protected areas (if existent).

Furthermore, a participatory process builds trust between the different entities and among the individuals involved, which can also serve as a basis for future community development and activities.

Dealing with project development and implementation of small scale projects offer the opportunity for small CSOs to gain further experiences in this field (Spangenberg et al. 2015). Numerous local CSOs in the project areas have already been active in the field of nature conservation before the start of the project and small grants provided within the project supported them in their aims and ideas. In addition, the project indirectly increased the capacity of the local CSOs. The level of knowledge and experiences in drafting applications and raising funds for specific activities was rather low.



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Besides benefit for local communities and nature, the implementation of a small grant scheme in the mentioned areas also contributed to bring the concept of the

European Green Belt to live as local partners like protected area administrations and CSOs are the backbone of the European Green Belt Initiative.

METHOD

The project included several steps:

1. WORKSHOPS

Within the project, PPNEA and EuroNatur together with the participants, including the responsible administrations, local CSOs, farmers and other stake-

holders, identified the current state of the project areas considering the value of the sites and their threats in various workshops held in 2015 (see table 01).

Table 01: Main threats for the natural values of the project areas

Main threats	For Rrajca	For Lumi I Gashit
Illegal logging	X	X
Illegal hunting	X	X
Illegal fishing	X	X
Unsustainable forest use	X	X
Unsustainable water use	-	X
Lack of other energy source besides wood	X	-
Overuse of medicinal plant species	X	X
Abandonment of traditional land-use practices	X	X
Unclear and complicated land property	-	X
Uncontrolled land development	-	X
Forest fires	-	X



Based on the natural values of the region and the main threats, the participants jointly identified and discussed possible activities to improve the situation.

As a result they developed a list of possible subjects for pilot projects tackling some of the main threats:

- Strengthening the environmental education in local schools;
- Awareness raising of the local population regarding the importance of nature protection;
- Supporting public buildings with economic stoves in order to reduce the fire wood consumption;
- Plantation of hazelnut trees in eroded areas as a further income generation for the local population and stabilization of degraded territory (only in Rrajca);
- Promotion of nature-oriented tourism and building capacities for nature guides;
- Construction or rehabilitation of water facilities on the pastureland to reduce the passing of the cattle through forests (only in Lumi I Gashit);
- Support of cultural traditions to promote the regional identity and to generate further income.



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2. CALL OF PROPOSALS

At the beginning of 2016 local CSOs from both project areas were asked to submit proposals for pilot projects based on the output of the workshops. The proposal had to be handed in in a template, describing the context of the project, its specific aims and activities as well as a detailed financial and time plan. Proposals were accepted both in Albanian as well as in English

language. While the call was open, applicants had the opportunity to get in touch with PPNEA in order to discuss their ideas as well as to clarify questions. This practice proved to be very helpful, because it prevented applicants from developing proposals which would not fit in the identified subjects and aims of the pilot projects.

3. SELECTION OF PROJECTS

The pilot project proposals were discussed between PPNEA, EuroNatur and the respective RAPA. Finally PPNEA and EuroNatur chose the five most suitable pilot projects (three to be implemented in Rrajca, two in Lumi I Gashit; see table 02) which addressed the threats in both areas best. Another focus during the selection was put on the pilot project outreach and multiplying effect. Consequently, projects benefiting and/or addressing different target groups were

selected to reach a high number of different local people. Aim was to choose pilot projects which involve locals directly or indirectly in nature conservation and to gain their support by raising interest for their natural surroundings and become active for their conservation.

The proposals were discussed and improved jointly with the local CSOs during workshops in February 2016.

4. IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The pilot projects were implemented from March 2016 until January 2017.

A **steering committee** was established as evaluation mechanism for the implementation of the pilot projects. The steering committee for each project area involved five persons, consisting of one representatives of EuroNatur, PPNEA and the respective RAPA

as well as two persons from the local community. The steering committee consisted of different stakeholders in order to combine different points of view and experiences, thus to be able to take different interests into account.

TASKS OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE WERE:

- to function as contact for the local CSOs,
- to provide support to the local CSOs during the implementation of the pilot projects,
- to monitor the implementation of the pilot projects,
- to collect feedback on the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and/or consistency of the pilot projects,
- to present the pilot projects to the local public.

The implementation of the pilot projects was **monitored** by PPNEA, including regular visits to the project site, often jointly with participants of the local steering committee.

In addition, the project team together with a representative of the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) visited the project area of Rrajca in the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park in July 2016.

5. CLOSING EVENT

A closing workshop in each project area was held during December 2016 in order to present the conducted pilot projects and their results. Each local CSO shortly presented its pilot project. In addition,

the project team presented the broader context of the project as well as the overall conclusions and lessons learned.

NATURE GUIDES FOR THE SHEBENIK-JABLLANICA NATIONAL PARK (RRAJCA)

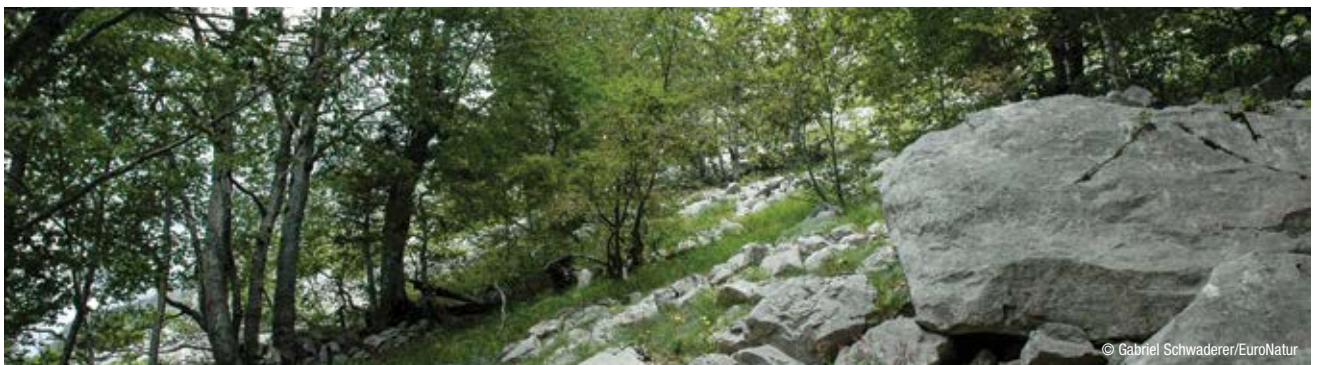
The pilot project “Nature Guides for the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park” was implemented jointly by the local CSOs Agri-En and Women Society of Librazhd in the southern area of the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park.

The main aim of the pilot project was to increase the awareness of the value of the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park, its biodiversity as well as to promote sustainable tourism as alternative income source to the local population.



ACTIVITIES

- a) Presentation of the pilot project and its aims to the broad public through public events and social media, especially to identify suitable persons for the nature guide training;
- b) Training of 12 motivated local persons as nature guides for the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park;
- c) Marking of two hiking trails with a total length of 25 km in the frame of the nature guide training (Trails: Rrajca Bardhaj – Shebenik; Rrajca Skenderbej - Liqenet e Shebenikut);
- d) Preparation of a leaflet presenting the marked trails as well as the values of the area;
- e) Celebration of the Green Belt Day on 24th September 2016 with a walk along the former Iron Curtain as well as a festival in the centre of Perrenjas city with traditional food and music.



RESULTS

- The awareness of the broad public about the values of the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park was increased through well attended public events like the celebration of the Green Belt Day;
- Well-informed and trained nature guides for the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park, who will continue to promote the values of the area;
- Communication material for visitors to promote the values of the area.

REDUCING AMOUNT OF FIRE WOOD THROUGH EFFICIENT HEATING DEVICES (RRAJCA)

The pilot project “Reducing amount of fire wood through efficient heating devices” was implemented by the local CSO AlbNatyra in the Bardhaj School Skenderbej, inside the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park.

The main aim of the pilot project was a reduction of the use of fire wood for heating purposes, thus to reduce the pressure on the communal forest area inside the National Park and contribute to the implementation of the management plan.

Before the implementation of the project, the classrooms of the Bardhaj School were heated with small ovens in every classroom which were fired with wood from the communal forest area of the National Park. In total, around 40 m wood were needed per year. With the installation of a central and economic heating system, a more efficient heating solution was implemented, posing a good and sustainable example for the entire area.



ACTIVITIES

- Installation of a central heating system in the Bardhaj School (8 rooms, 52 students, 9 teachers) with a more economic system which can be used with different materials like fire wood, biomass, pellets as well as gas;
- Communication of the benefits and sustainability of the project to the local population through teaching of school staff and schoolchildren.



RESULTS

- More effective heating with less wood consumption (reduction of fire wood by around 25 %);
- Increased awareness of the local community regarding importance of firewood reduction and alternatives to “conventional ovens”.

IMPROVEMENT OF UNDER-UTILIZED AND DEGRADED AGRICULTURE LAND (RRAJCA)

The local CSO Egnatia implemented the pilot project “Improvement of under-utilized and degraded agriculture land” to improve the fallow land of the Skenderbej Community, located inside the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park.

The main aim of this pilot project was the cultivation of degraded agriculture areas with trees as well as to introduce a sustainable and alternative income

source for the local farmers. The areas were originally covered with forest and converted into agriculture land in the early 1990s. Due to the fact that these specific areas are not very productive for agriculture, they turned into fallow land and are today degraded uncultivated land, prone to erosion. However, these areas are suitable for hazelnut trees and their plantation improves the state of natural ecosystems.



ACTIVITIES

- Plantation of 850 hazelnut trees (one-year old) on 0.8 ha degraded agriculture areas on private land of 5 families (2-5 fields per family) in Skenderbej; the local school was involved in the plantation activities;
- Communication of the importance of a functioning natural ecosystem as well as hazelnut as an alternative income source through promotion activities.



RESULTS

- Example for the sustainable improvement of income: The project already shows effect as good example and the interest of the local residents to convert degraded areas to arable land by planting hazelnuts or other suitable plants has significantly increased;
- Improvement of the cooperation between different stakeholders of the area: local farmers, CSOs and RAPA;
- The soil of 0.8 ha degraded land is already better protected against erosion.

REHABILITATION OF WATER FACILITIES (LUMI I GASHIT)

The pilot project “Rehabilitation of water facilities” was implemented by the local CSO ALPIN in the pasture areas around the Strict Nature Reserve Lumi I Gashit in the Albanian Alps.

The aim of the pilot project was to reduce the impact of grazing in Lumi I Gashit through the rehabilitation of livestock water facilities (in Albanian: Lerras). Before the implementation of the project, the water facilities in the pastures around Gashi often dried out during summer,

so that the shepherds needed to guide their livestock to the river Gashi for drinking – thereby passing through the Strict Nature Reserve, which had a negative impact on the forest. The improvement of Lerras in the pasture areas reduces the grazing impact on the forest and therefore contributes to the implementation of the Management Plan of Lumi I Gashit Strict Nature Reserve as well as to the protection of the planned National Park Albanian Alps.



ACTIVITIES

- Implementation of three round tables with RAPA, shepherds and local administrations of the area Bytyc, Tropoje and Margega to inform about the project and identify two suitable Lerras;
- Rehabilitation of two Lerras in the pastures located close to the Lumi I Gashit Strict Nature Reserve (in Gjarpri i Bashaje and Zhgralle of Droçe), which are used by 12 farmers with around 900 sheep;
- Different activities with local children from three schools of the main villages, including field trips, clean-up of the school premises and the preparation of herbariums;
- Awareness raising activities to communicate the natural values and conservation needs of the area to the local population to widen the impact of the pilot project.



RESULTS

- Increased awareness of the biodiversity and value of the Strict Nature Reserve Lumi I Gashit among the local population;
- The rehabilitation of two Lerras has reduced the movement of domestic animals in the river area and thus reduced grazing pressure on the Strict Nature Reserve;
- The project poses a good example of how to build water facilities and the locals show already great interest for further reconstruction of other degraded water facilities.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND AWARENESS RAISING IN THE ALBANIAN ALPS (LUMI I GASHIT)

The CSO TAKO Valbona implemented an education and awareness raising programme for school children of the areas Bajram Curri, Valbona and Dragobi, which are located in the Albanian Alps, close to the Strict Nature Reserve Lumi I Gashit.

The aim of the pilot project “Environmental education and awareness raising in the Albanian Alps” was to raise awareness of the local population on the values of biodiversity and related conservation needs of protected areas. The activities also addressed examples of sustainable development.



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ACTIVITIES

- a) Implementation of a three day education programme in the Valbona Valley National Park with 35 students and five teachers from five local schools of Bajram Curri, Valbona and Dragobi, including different topics like biodiversity, forest, water, hunting and waste;
- b) Preparation of an exhibition for the History Museum in Bajram Curri by the participants of the education programme to show the results of their work and illustrate the natural value of the area. As a preparation as well as to improve the knowledge about planning and broadening their viewpoint, the participants visited the National Gallery of Art in Tirana to see the exhibition on National Planning. On the way they also visited an organic farm.



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RESULTS

- Increased knowledge about ecosystems and biodiversity as well as awareness of natural values and protection needs of the area of local people through the education programme;
- Increased visibility of the natural values of the area through the exhibition in the History Museum in Bajram Curri to the broad public and visitors of the area;
- The pilot project has supported the will of the local communities for conservation, shown by recent participation of different groups in the campaigning against hydropower plants planned to be constructed in the surrounding area.



The two project sites - the core zone Rrajca in the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park and the Strict Nature Reserve Lumi I Gashit – **have a supranational importance** regarding the efforts to protect the last primeval beech forest of Europe. Both areas are part of the UNESCO World Nature Heritage “Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe” since July 2017. In addition, they are relevant in the frame of the European Green Belt Initiative as two important pearls along the Balkan Green Belt.

The project “Nature Conservation and Sustainable Development at the Green Belt Albania” aimed on raising the awareness about the general responsibility to ensure long-term protection of the target areas. By including different target groups and stakeholders (locals of different professions, local and national CSOs, protected area management authorities) maximum outreach was aimed at.

All in all the implementation of activities by EuroNatur and PPNEA in the frame of this project was successful. **Through a participatory**

approach the project team achieved to develop pilot projects which benefit both nature and people. In addition, the involvement of a wide range of people in the development process provided access to a broader range of perspectives and ideas. This also increased the support for the projects as well as nature protection in the community in general. The chosen approach was suitable and well accepted by the different stakeholders involved in the project.

The five implemented **pilot projects** present varied best practice examples illustrating a sustainable development which successfully combines the increase of nature conservation with an improvement of the livelihood of locals. Thus, all pilot projects point out the importance to reduce the forest use in the area. Furthermore, the examples are a motivation for the local population to implement similar activities by themselves. Also the pilot projects illustrate that small grant projects can also contribute to improving the management of protected areas. Especially when the local population is affected by restrictions of use, pilot projects can show alternatives to secure income.

In addition, the different project activities contributed to influence **positive changes** in the project areas through the increase of:

- Education and awareness on general environmental issues and particularly on nature conservation and rehabilitation of the area;
- Awareness of the importance of a functioning forest ecosystem;
- Capacity building and institutional strengthening of local CSOs;
- Linkages between the project activities of community-based organizations and regional level policy makers, like municipalities and RAPA;
- Cooperation between different stakeholders;
- Exchange between local CSOs.

Based on the gained experiences and outcome of the pilot projects during this project as well as previous small grant projects, the project team elaborated the following **recommendations** which shall be considered for similar projects:

- Communication is important to build a closer relationship with other stakeholders and the support of the broad public;
- The involvement of different stakeholders is important to identify the core problems and most urgent needs of an area as well as potential solutions. In addition, it is a very effective approach to develop a common understanding, solidarity as well as to build connections between the stakeholders;
- The participatory development of project proposals result in greater ties with the project as well as within the group of stakeholder and the beneficiaries;
- Good planning and consideration of different aspects and possible difficulties in the early stages of the project planning are the key for a successful implementation of projects;
- Lack of capacity (human resources, organizational and/or administrative structures) of the conducting CSOs often resulted in difficulties during the project implementation, which can be reduced through cooperation and capacity building;
- The most successful projects are carried out by local organizations with strong, collaborative leadership capacity;
- Clear tangible results and reports made available/visible to other stakeholders and the broad public leads to a high level of support within the community;
- Cooperation between projects, networking, exchange of experiences and support contribute to a capacity building of all participating organizations and increase the benefits of the implemented activities;
- Awareness raising activities are important to widen the impact of projects.

In summary, the project provided a good starting point for the areas as UNESCO World Nature Heritage. The project informed the local population of the reasons why these areas are particularly worth protecting as well as about the UNESCO nomination process, its consequences and possibilities. The project showed that the locals support the protection as well as the UNESCO nomination.

This is a first step, but it is not enough to ensure the protection of the ancient beech forests. The existing management plans have to be implemented and the abidance of the UNESCO criteria ensured. Particular care must be taken to establish and maintain an adequate buffer zone around the virgin beech forest sites. For Lumi I Gashit this means that the final designation of the National Park Albanian Alps with a corresponding effective management plan is important for its long-term conservation.

5. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

asl	Above sea level
BfN	German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
FYR	Former Yugoslav Republic
ICJ	International Court of Justice
PPNEA	Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania
RAPA	Regional Agency of Protected Areas
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council resolution

6. IMPLEMENTED PILOT PROJECTS

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The activities and results of all five implemented pilot projects (see table 02) in the frame of this project “Nature Conservation and Sustainable Development at the Green Belt Albania” are shortly presented.

Table 2: Implemented Pilot Projects

Name of Pilot Project	Funded Budget	Project Area	Local CSOs	Page
Nature Guides for the Shebenik-Jabllanica National Park	4,200 €	Rrajca	Agri-En Woman Society of Librazhd	16
Reducing amount of fire wood through efficient heating devices	4,700 €	Rrajca	AlbNatyra	17
Improvement of under-utilized and degraded agriculture land	2,900 €	Rrajca	Egnatia	18
Rehabilitation of water facilities	4,100 €	Lumi i Gashit	ALPIN	19
Environmental education and awareness raising programme	4,100 €	Lumi i Gashit	TOKA - Valbona	20

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