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Final Report - Summary

TOURISM

Feasibility Study for Trans-border Biosphere Reserve Osogovo

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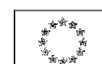
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The current report was prepared in the period 22.11.2014 – 06.05.2015, and it is part of the project entitled “Feasibility Study for Trans-border Biosphere Reserve Osogovo” implemented by the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation – Branch Belasitsa (the Contracting Authority for this assignment) in partnership with the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius - Skopje. The work included distant survey of accessible information sources about the tourist resources, conditions and baseline development of tourism on the territory (list of sources is given as Annex IV to this report). This survey was followed by field work in each of the municipalities including meetings with relevant stakeholders and visits to selected sites. This phase was highly supported by the staff and experts of the Macedonian partner. All the work was done in strict coordination with the Contracting authority and the other external experts (Cultural and Historical Heritage; Economics; Sociology; Flora; Fauna; Forestry & Agronomy), so that the best possible synergy is acquired, help is provided to one another where needed, and repetitions are avoided. This coordination includes also three experts’ and staff meetings, at the start of studies, at the middle and the end - for discussion of results.

The report contains the most significant findings in regard to the evaluation of the tourism potential of Osogovo Region as a Biosphere Reserve – information that has to help the formulation of the final Feasibility Study. All detailed data is given as annexes, as well as some basic terms and analysis of Osogovo tourism.

For the purposes of tourism analysis, focus has naturally been laid on the Osogovo Mountains themselves but important sites and resources have also been included from the surroundings - mostly the remaining territories of the municipalities of Cheshinovo-Obleshevo, Delchevo, Makedonska Kamenitsa, Kochani, Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Probishtip, Rankovce (plus Vinitsa to a certain extent) in MK, and Kyustendil and Nevestino in BG.

From a conceptual point of view, focus was laid on sustainable tourism. By ‘sustainable’ we mean (here and below) tourism that could be of any type but is developing in a way that does not destroy its own resources including the environment they are located in, at the same time bringing tangible economic benefits to the local communities. Our recommendations about the future development of tourism in Osogovo as a biosphere reserve are given below:

Opportunities of Osogovo Region as a Biosphere Reserve AND a joint tourism destination

1. Sustainable ecotourism

By ‘ecotourism’ we mean tourism whose main resource are the natural assets of an area. Equally relevant would be a definition where ecotourism is a type of tourism where the main motivation for travel of the visitors are the natural values or communication with the natural environment.

Osogovo Region has substantial natural resources that are valuable enough for the designation of several protected areas. Those are assets of international importance, able to attract a market share of visitors that is steadily growing in past years. Furthermore, these are tourists who respect both local environment and local culture and people, and are ready to pay higher for a comprehensive tourist service.

Eco-tourism services that may be packed in Osogovo Region:

- wildlife watching programmes for birds, flowers, butterflies, amphibians and reptiles, etc.
- walking trails, longer and shorter (for experienced trekkers and for less trained visitors) well-marked and signed, safe, preferably guided, with eventual necessary infrastructure such as rest places, info boards, etc.
- cycling trails, well-marked and signed, with supporting services for bikers

- interpretative trails (short, circular, themed) with the necessary infrastructure and trained guides/interpreters, offered near point where other tourism services are concentrated
- adventure programmes such as climbing, rafting, paragliding, etc.
- environmental education programmes for children from both countries

2. Sustainable cultural tourism

By 'cultural' tourism we mean tourism based on cultural and historical resources and where the main motivation for travel of the visitors is learning about culture and history.

Cultural tourism services that may be packed in Osogovo Region:

- interpretative visits to cultural and historical sites, with developed programmes for interpretation and trained interpreters
- archaeological work camps with elements of studying and contribution to local heritage valorization
- demonstrations of crafts such as pottery, iron-smithing, making of baskets, weaving, etc.
- hobby courses in crafts which have the potential of raising interest; for example no matter how interesting is the stone production that was typical of Lesnovo Village, a hobby course in stone cutting is quite unlikely to inspire substantial visitor flows
- demonstrations of local folklore with an accent on features that are different from other regions – in singing, dancing, rituals, tales or costumes
- song and dance courses – these are especially interesting for foreign visitors
- special packages based on traditional lifestyle such as 'The Path of Wine' from grape cutting to bottling or 'The Path of Bread' from ploughing to baking

- culinary courses for local recipes including the preparation of winter conserved meals (lyutenitsa, ayvar, etc.)
- tourist events based on the local cultural agenda or new specially designed ones but packed for the visitors (not for local people) and marketed accordingly

3. Sustainable rural tourism

By 'rural' tourism we mean tourism based on the traditional rural lifestyle and where the main motivation for travel of the visitors is learning about this lifestyle.

Rural tourism services that may be packed in Osogovo Region:

- stay in rural guesthouses for simple relaxation in clean and unstressed environment and with healthy food
- rural lifestyle practices such as gathering of herbs and mushrooms; collecting of forest fruits and making jam; milking domestic animals and making cheese and butter, etc.

4. Sustainable health tourism

By 'health' tourism we mean tourism based on the main motivation of visitors to relax, improve their general health status or get healed from some disease.

Health tourism services that may be packed in Osogovo Region:

- spa packages based on mineral waters abundance
- special wellness programmes based on the healing effect of the mountain, physical exercises and – possibly – mineral waters
- weight loss programmes (one of the acute problems of modern urban society)

5. Other types of tourism

Theory claims that ANY type of tourism can develop in a sustainable way, even such types that are usually considered the firm opposite of sustainable. A typical example is ski tourism for which some might claim that it simply cannot be sustainable because it needs to turn mountain terrains from their natural status to an artificial status (destroyed by man).

The truth is, there will always be people willing to practice winter sports and winter sports have to develop somewhere. Indeed, they need to change some valuable terrains from their natural status but then that is also the case with agriculture, roads and any other kind of human development. There are places, including in Osogovo Region where such infrastructure have already been constructed to a certain point. The best way to try and bring ski tourism as close to sustainable as possible is to: (1) make the most of already existing infrastructure, with better maintenance, small improvements where necessary and good marketing to secure a steady visitor flow; (2) limitate the need of / use of artificial snow machinery as it is harmful not only to biodiversity but to local people when chemicals dissolve in drinking water sources; (3) make real economic evaluations of potential tourism development, not the ones that investors would be pleased to hear. This means to evaluate the number of visitors that would actually like to come to the area for skiing against the investment needed and effect on local communities and their environment.

Summary information for PR purposes of the project

The geographic location of the Osogovo Region, though a serious liability in the not so distant past of the Iron Curtain, is quite an asset in the modern world of uniting nations. The region is easily accessible from all sides; it has the advantage of uniting two countries; and it is conveniently close to the capitals of both – respectively to the biggest domestic markets and the entrance gates for the foreign markets via the international airports of Sofia and Skopje. The landscape of Osogovo Mountains may not be unique

for the Balkans but it has features of sufficient interest to be used as a tourist resource – there are seven landscape types that may be easily and attractively interpreted. The mountain itself and the broader area of the adjacent municipalities host some very specific sites that may serve as a focus of tourist interest.

The climate of Osogovo Region is no more or less favourable than any other mountain in that part of the Balkans. It provides sufficiently good conditions for the development of many types of tourism. The water resources of the region provide excellent potential for the development of various tourism services, incl. some water sports, fishing, spa and the simple pleasures of recreation.

The plant life of Osogovo as a tourist resource possesses a significant degree of attractiveness to serve as a basis for the formulation of modern tourist services and products. The area of Osogovo has a great potential to develop tourism products based on the diversity and values of its animal life as well. It has charismatic species that are of general interest not only to bird watchers or other customers with specialized interests but to the general public as well.

Protected nature territories are a mark that a certain place has something valuable and thus interesting to learn about. They are often a focus of contemporary tourism. The broader region of Osogovo has a good potential to develop products and services connected to its protected areas and sites.

The region of Osogovo is quite rich in archaeological and religious sites from various historic periods; some of them are extremely valuable. The renowned and suitable for tourist visits sites are quite sufficient as quality and quantity to form a comprehensive tourism product. The museum network of the region may not be very well developed but there are museum sites of real interest and potential. It should be noted that the town of Kyustendil is a unique exception from the general picture as it possesses one of the best museum networks in Bulgaria for such a mid-sized town.

The folklore heritage of the Osogovo Region is rich and colourful, and sufficiently preserved as a tourism resource but should be exploited very carefully when packing tourist services so that a marketable product is developed. The cultural calendar of Osogovo is both well established, full of traditional and well known events, and diverse as types of events – folklore, modern music, arts, sports, etc. There are many traditional practices from the region that may be utilized as a tourism resource, especially those related to food and drink production, as well as farming and stock-breeding. Local cuisine also has some specifics that may create marketing advantages.

The status of general public infrastructure in the region of Osogovo is not a limitation factor for the development of tourism. Supply of electricity, water and communications is secured; and sewage is available at least in the municipal centers. Road network is well developed but needs better maintenance.

Basic tourism services (accommodation and catering) in the region of Osogovo are sufficient for the time being given the fact that even the existing ones are not efficiently utilized. There is disproportion in the geographical distribution and the diversity of accommodation and catering establishments.

There is quite a good number of existing trails on the territory of Osogovo, both walking and cycling. They connect interesting sites and places, natural as well as historical. The trails need better management and organization.

There is a sufficient local capacity to start an organized and structured development of Osogovo Region as a tourist destination despite the harsh negative demographic tendencies the region has been experiencing in past decades. There is of course a shortage of experience, knowledge and skills at some points but with high levels of motivation and partnership good results can be achieved.

There is very scarce statistical information about visitor flows in Osogovo but the global market picture shows that (a) tourism is steadily growing worldwide and Europe holds a great share in it, and (b) given the trends in market development, Osogovo is well

positioned to claim a market share of its own. It will be naturally small, at least in the beginning, but against the current situation any development will be an improvement.

Finally, it has been found that a significant number of projects related to tourism development have been implemented in the region of Osogovo in the past 15 or so years. They have involved all the municipal administrations plus a large number of non-governmental organizations and other actors. A lot of improvements have been achieved as a result, including infrastructural developments, exchanges between partners and people on both sides of the border and raised promotional levels. Sustainable tourism development, however, requires more time and constant efforts as it is a bottom-up development by default, and the change in local people is the slowest change possible.