



Prokletije – Montenegro



Mt. Arapit – Albania



Guri i Kuq – Kosova

BALKANS PEACE PARK PROJECT

Creating a trans-national, cross-border park in the adjoining mountain areas
of

Albania, Kosovo/a, Montenegro

UK Registered Charity No. 1105447

www.balkanspeacepark.org



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CROSS-BORDER THOUGHTS

Maybe it's time to remind ourselves and our readers what B3P set out to achieve when it started in June 2001 and what inspired the dream of a truly international, cross-border 'Peace Park' in the mountain range which straddles Albania, Kosovo/a and Montenegro in the Balkans. Put simply:

- We wanted to see people and communities in the three countries thinking and working together to protect the glorious natural environment they live in;
- We wanted to see visitors coming to walk, climb, cycle, cave or study the natural history in and through the mountains, bringing income to families in the valleys so that they could continue to live there instead of migrating to towns and cities or even abroad.

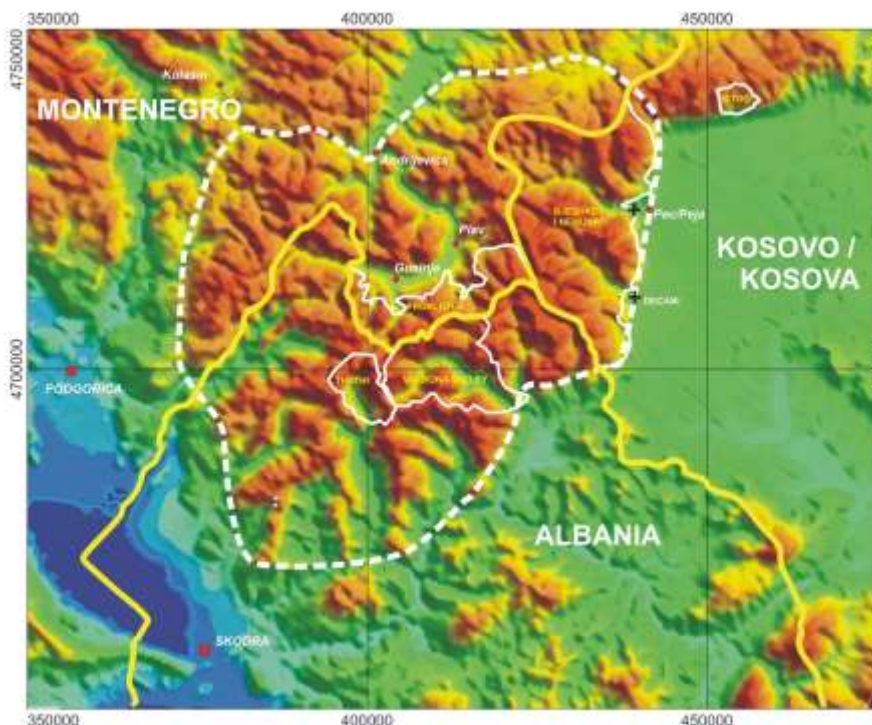
Where did this idea and the dream come from?

It came from Kosovars and Albanians who had lived and suffered through the Kosovan ethnic cleansing and civil war of the 1990s and the turbulent years of post-communist Albania. They wanted to break away from the intense and destructive nationalisms so prevalent throughout the Balkans, to reach out to communities across borders to protect their unique natural heritage and to share it with discerning visitors worldwide. UK friends of the region responded to the enthusiasm and vision of these activists on the ground by developing their ideas into the proposed Balkans Peace Park.

How far has it come?

Looking at the old question “Is our glass half full or half empty?” we can say that the B3P glass is at least half full of quality wine. Or should it be raki?!

- Many farmers in the valleys have diversified into providing well-equipped guesthouse accommodation for the increasing number of mountain walkers and trekkers, notably on the cross-border Peaks of the Balkans waymarked trail. This runs for 190kms through the three countries, created in 2012 by the German development organization GIZ, working with Local Action Groups. B3P gets some credit for this major initiative, having been active in cross-border adventure on foot or on bicycles since the first international trek in 2003.
- The population drift from the valleys has slowed as tourist income comes in, but is still a problem in some places. More families now stay in Thethi for the winter.
- A system for getting police permission in advance to cross the borders was agreed in principle in 2011 and does seem to work, more or less.
- There are now individuals and local companies in each country engaged in business to provide transport, guides and accommodation for mountain tourists. They also work in close cooperation with each other, across the borders.
- The B3P Summer Programmes in Thethi since 2008, extending later to Valbona, Lëpushë, Vermosh and this year to Plav, have increased environmental awareness in young people and enabled them to welcome visitors in English and to act as guides.
- We must not forget the ‘Letter of Good Intent’, signed in 2006 by leaders of six municipalities in the B3P region, to support the principle of cross-border cooperation and the establishment of the Balkans Peace Park.
- This map shows how, since the creation of the Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park in Kosovo/a in 2013, the national parks in Albania, Kosovo/a and Montenegro link together.



Dotted white line =
outline of proposed
B3P area
Yellow lines = national
borders
Continuous white lines
= the four national
parks:
Prokletije
(Montenegro)

Bjeshkët e Nemuna (Kosovo/a)

Thethi and Valbona (Albania)

- What is needed to fill the empty bit of the B3P 'glass'? Let the Albanian government create a high level, policy making directorate for its so far only nominal national parks, so that the governments of all three countries can collaborate deeply on effective environmental protection and control of development. Then a Balkans Peace Park could become a political and geographical reality and our glass would overflow with a Balkans liquid of our choice: good local wine or beer? Raki? Or just the clear fresh water which flows from mountain springs to reward us as we walk freely across the borders in Prokletije/Bjeshkët e Nemuna?

1. 2014 SUMMER PROGRAMMES

a) Plav – Montenegro – August 2nd to 8th

In a really exciting development this year, a one week programme of English teaching and environmental activity took place at the 'eco-village' mountain camp in the Babino Polje valley outside Plav. This was a true collaboration between B3P, the Prokletije National Park, HRID mountaineering club, TRITON environmental NGO and Kelsey Aho's cross-border project (See below). UK volunteer Sylvia Shatwell had visited Plav in March 2014, working hard to gain the confidence of the National Park Director, Enko Dreskovic, and the staff. Her



persistence paid off brilliantly and the resulting week's programme was so successful that everyone wants it to run again next year for two weeks. The UK volunteers were Sylvia herself, Gina Greenley from Leeds, who also worked on the programme in Lëpushë in Albania, and Simon Philpott who used his building experience

for further construction at the camp. The photo shows an 'Introductions' session at the mountain camp. The graduation ceremony at the end of the week was held in the cultural centre in Plav and gained a short article in a national newspaper. Sylvia appreciated the considerable help she had had from Emir Feratovic in the Tourist Office in Plav.

b) Multilateral Dialogue in Prokletije/ Bjeshkët e Namuna

Kelsey Aho, from the University of North Carolina in the US, had been an international volunteer on the Vermosh Summer Programme in 2012. She had begun to notice that while the mountain tourists were crossing borders and seeing and meeting people in other communities the local children and adults knew little about life outside their own villages. This year she launched her 'multilateral dialogue' project, working with 20 young people in each country to promote

collaboration between themselves, guesthouses and the eco-tourist organizers. Students designed postcards to highlight the attractions of their village, began to use maps, without borders, to show where the highlights were and discussed what they could do at a future international gathering of students from all three countries. The photo shows students engaged in the map making exercise at the



mountain camp in Montenegro. The postcards were exchanged by mail. There is now real excitement among the young people at the prospect of meeting and collaborating with their counterparts over the borders.

c) THETHI – August 11 – 16th

At a meeting in Bristol early in the year it was decided not to organize a Summer Programme in Thethi from the UK but to support B3P Albania in arranging a programme there themselves. By July that looked very unlikely because key people had left the B3PA committee. However, Antonela Melonari, Albanian and working in London, and Angela Selmani, B3P UK Secretary in Leeds, heard that people in Thethi were very anxious to have another Summer Programme, so they got together and arranged a programme off their own bat, joined by Besim Morina, a historian and headteacher from Kosova. It ran very successfully from 11th to 16th August with 20 children aged 5 to 16, much appreciated in the village where they are asking again for a programme in 2015. Some curriculum topics were “Imagine a peace park”, “Letters and postcards to England”, along with art and environment projects.

d) Vermosh and Lëpushë - July 14th to August 1st

This year’s Summer Programme in Vermosh and Lepushë, Albania, ran for three weeks from 14th July to 1st August, slightly earlier in the year than previously. This was the third time that B3P has operated in both villages and, as in previous years, English Language classes were a key activity. This year, however, there was a greater emphasis on the environment and tourism and, outside the school, on research into opportunities for the development of sustainable tourism in the area, including informal meetings with individual guesthouse owners and more

formal meetings in both Vermosh and Lepushë for all those with an interest in tourism development.

Volunteers and visitors

In total, thirteen people participated as volunteers/teachers/translators in the 2014 SP in Vermosh and Lepushë: three from Albania, two from Kosova, one from the USA, one from the Netherlands and six from the UK. Of these, Sylvia, Kelsey, Tom, Jonid and Klejd had worked on previous summer programmes in the two villages. The SP also played host to a number of visitors, including a party of trekkers led by Richard (Hargreaves), a party of English teenagers from Wilderness Expertise, a tourism student (and 'graduate' of B3P's summer school in Thethi 2008) from Shkodra, publisher Flutura Açka and a party of German/ Norwegian/Dutch



publishers, Barbara Haussamann (and friends), representatives from the American Embassy in Tirana and the Albanian environmental NGO PPNEA (Preservation and Promotion of the Natural Environment in Albania), who had also visited in previous years. The photo shows Richard's trekking group meeting with SP volunteers in the café in Vermosh., a gathering as bright with goodwill and enthusiasm as the evening sunshine which lit it up.

e) Future Summer Programmes

There is now considerable debate in the B3P UK committee about the future of the SPs. They have been an undoubted success, bringing active help to communities in Thethi, Vermosh, Lëpushë and now Plav. The SP in Valbona in 2008 is said to be still talked about. Our SPs not only help communities where they are held but they also raise the profile of B3P more widely. We are determined to have a programme again in Plav in 2015, Thethi is asking for one, Lëpushë too, but there is less demand in Vermosh where, sadly, the population continues to decline and young people say they want to learn English so that they can emigrate to America. Oh dear, not what the SPs are for! B3P activities are intended to enable families to continue living in the valleys, not leave them. We think there is increasing need for an SP again in Valbona.

Differing needs

Hitherto the emphasis has been on providing basic English for young people and environmental awareness. However, we found in Lëpushë especially that there was a crying need for help in attracting and providing for visitors as well as just communicating with them. Is there less need for English teaching in Plav and Gusinje, for example, where the schools already provide this? Should Kelsey's imaginative scheme for cross-border cultural communication and international socialising be part of wider SP activity? How will needs change in Valbona, Thethi and the Vermosh region when the roads are improved and access is on tarmac roads? Could we be of use in Kosova where ERA (Environmentally Responsible Action) in Peja already reaches out to engage young people in many environmental and cultural activities, including across the borders? So we are seeking to identify the different needs in the different communities in the different countries. Timing and dates for SPs are also an issue; in Vermosh/Lëpushë the SPs coincided with haytime when children were needed on the fields not in classrooms! All these variables make for quite a challenge and then all depends on the international volunteers who come forward to offer their differing skills and interests.

Volunteering

In a world riven with conflict and self-interest it is heart-warming and inspiring that each year people of all ages, from different countries, with a range of skill and experience, volunteer to come to the Balkans at their own considerable expense to give their time, energy and imagination to stimulate the minds and broaden the outlook of young people in the valleys of the Prokletije/Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountains. Long may this continue! We recruit volunteers by word of mouth, personal contact, publicity in the media and on the internet, and with an application form (too big to include here) on the B3P website www.balkanspeacepark.org .

2. CROSS-BORDER TREKKING

a) PoB – Peaks of the Balkans

There is no doubt that this waymarked circular trail of 190kms through the mountains of the three countries is a huge success. A few people come to do the whole trail over 15 to 18 days, many more come in organized groups or as individuals independently to do parts of the route or variations on it. Lendita Hyseni in Peja, now running her own company 'Kosova Outdoor', arranged for a dozen or more groups, mainly from Italy, to do her 8 or 9 day 'PoB' package, as well as arranging guides, accommodation and transport for other trekkers, e.g. Richard's UK group (see below). Endrit Shima and the 'Zbulo' company bring groups from DAV, the German Alpine Club, to do the PoB. In B3P UK we get numerous enquiries from people in the UK and other countries for information and advice about the trail or trekking in general and maybe 20 or more of them this year have happily headed for the Balkans. One or two have even gone there having been to one of Richard's public lectures on B3P!

b) Doberdol

Doberdol 1744m is Albania's highest summer village, well above the tree line and probably the most remote village on the PoB trail, lying just below the tri-point, Trekufini/Tromedra 2366m, where Kosova, Albania and Montenegro meet. After staying in Doberdol in 2013 Richard persuaded the B3P UK committee to donate some money to the family which had built a basic walkers' cabin there. Specifically, it was to build a safer and more environmentally appropriate toilet to replace the rickety wooden cupboard perched over a stream. Now there is solid cabin with a concrete base and a pit below. Endrit Shima who arranged for the complicated money transfer to the Doberdol family now hopes that other families there who are beginning to accommodate walking visitors will build similar toilets. In 2013, to a mountain walker Doberdol seemed a remote and romantic place, even with a touch of the Wild West about it as young men galloped on horses over the hillsides, horses being the only transport to the village. Now someone has brought a bulldozer to make a rudimentary road or track there and part of the romance will be diminished.

c) Richard's 2014 trek

As well as covering familiar ground, e.g. walking over the carpet of Edelweiss and other flowers on Hajla Peak 2403m on the Kosova/Montenegro border and the glorious walk from Rugova along the Jelenak ridge to Babino Polje in Montenegro, Richard's UK group of 6 took in new adventures on its journey between Peja and Thethi, July 9th – 22nd. From Peja Lendita arranged for old friend Fatos Lajci to drive us up to a family guesthouse and then guide us up Gjeravica 2656m, Kosova's highest peak. It was cloudy with sleet on top but it is a beautiful 5½ hour walk, highly recommended. From Grbaje in Montenegro Pavlin Polia had arranged a 3 day walk to Thethi, via Lëpushë and Nikq. Everything was enjoyable but some highlights were: gate-crashing volunteer Gina Greenley's English lesson on the Summer Programme in Lëpushë



before the evening drive to the café in Vermosh to meet Tom Phillips, the SP coordinator, and the cheerful group of teaching volunteers and interpreters; the long 1400m descent to low lying Nikq; and the wild 'karst' limestone scenery behind Maja Arapit (2217m) before the descent to Thethi. The mountain flowers were still spectacular in July, though the extra-special *Lilium Albanicum* were over by then.

d) Cross-border police permission

To get the necessary permission in advance for crossing borders in unofficial places, would-be trekkers can either follow the instructions on the B3P website to get the permission themselves

by contacting the police in each country or they can use trek organizers in the region who will do it for them. The names and e-mail addresses of particularly helpful people are in the instructions on the website. A surprise problem arose this year when the Montenegrin police in Berane began asking for a fee for each application, 10 euros per group or even per person. This was not in the agreement between all three border police forces in Podgorica in 2011. Representations have been made at a high level in the Ministry of Tourism and Travel in Montenegro including a detailed letter from B3P. It is hoped that the issue will be resolved before the trekking season in 2015.

3. EUROPEAN GREEN BELT PROJECT

The European Green Belt is an area of great biodiversity and wildlife conservation along the line of the former Iron Curtain, running from Finland to the Black Sea and the Adriatic. From 23rd to



26th September 2014, UK committee member Teresa Lappe-Osthege joined more than 100 representatives from 23 countries bordering the European Green Belt, plus Canada and the US, for the 8th Pan-European Green Belt Conference in Slavonice, Czech Republic. As the Balkans Peace Park forms part of the Balkan section of the European Green Belt, this was a valuable opportunity to meet a large number of partners, collaborators and like-minded individuals, such as the Kosovo Environmental Protection Agency, Greenhome Montenegro and the Albanian Ministry of Environment, Forests and Water Administration, to name but a few, to

exchange ideas and experiences in a stimulating setting. It was an opportunity to re-visit shared commitments and responsibilities in the process of establishing a transboundary national park between Albania, Kosovo/a and Montenegro, while at the same time identifying new channels of cooperation. Through formal discussions and informal exchanges, regional priorities were identified, among them issues of transnational management and nature tourism which are highly relevant in the context of the Balkans Peace Park. Most importantly, however, the European Green Belt Association was established, which provides a legal framework for enhancing cooperation and coordination of governmental and non-governmental organizations working in the European Green Belt regions. It is hoped that in the long-term such a legal body will provide

the foundations and guidance necessary to sustain, improve and expand the work of the European Green Belt.

4. CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Tom Phillips is a poet, playwright, journalist based in Bristol, with a PhD in Travel Writing from Reading University. He has coordinated the B3P Summer Programmes in Vermosh for the last three years but is now involved in an even wider project, as he explains here:

"The gist is that, very much thanks to my involvement with B3P, I've been able to make contact with more than 70 writers, artists, theatre-makers and other creative types across SE Europe and, together, we're now working towards establishing a cultural exchange programme. This aims to make contemporary work more accessible in both SE Europe and the UK through translation, publication and actual physical exchange visits (readings by poets, plays in performance etc). Most of this is taking place online at the moment (indeed, on the oft-maligned Facebook!), but in June the Arts Council/British Council paid for me to spend a week in Prishtina to discuss plans for a multilingual website and at least two anthologies of translated work - and to read at the National Library of Kosova. As a result of that, the theatre director Iliriana Arifi asked if she could produce a translation of my play "*I Went To Albania*" in Prishtina - and it's this which is due to be performed there in the next few months. Other activities include the online collaborative project Colourful Star (<http://msvstp.blogspot.co.uk/>) which I run with a Bulgarian painter, Marina Shiderova. The aims of this programme obviously complement those of B3P so I'm hoping that it will lead to some interesting and mutually beneficial 'overlaps'. A 'Poets of the Balkans' to complement Peaks of the Balkans, perhaps!"

5. AGROBIODIVERSITY IN RURAL AREAS OF ALBANIA

On October 15/16th Klejd Kosta from Tirana, who had been a strong leader at the B3P Summer Programmes in Lëpushë in July, was able to attend a workshop in Valbona on 'Conservation of Agrobiodiversity in Rural Areas of Albania', thanks to some funding from B3P Albania. The workshop was arranged by Shpresa Smajli of GIZ and the 'Albanian Peaks' Local Action Group (LAG). The focus was on management plans for preserving biodiversity in rural areas, LAG members training guesthouse owners and mountain guides in the sustainable use of resources in the serving of food and knowledge of medicinal plants, certification of organic products characteristic of the area and mounting an awareness campaign for preserving the biodiversity and what the people of the areas can do for it. Klejd said there was great stress on the need for cooperation between GIZ, LAGs and B3P and the possible joint arrangement of a Summer Programme on these themes in Valbona in 2015.

6. B3P UK COMMITTEE CHANGES

At the Annual General meeting in London on September 20th 2014, several changes were agreed because Ann Kennard wished to stand down as Chairperson after several years of outstanding work and commitment. The new committee is:

Ann Kennard	President
Peter Spafford	Chair
John Milsom	Treasurer
Angela Selmani	Secretary for Minutes, Volunteer and SP Administration
Antonia Young	Secretary for correspondence
Richard Hargreaves	Newsletter, trekking information, etc.
Committee members:	Keith Bowden, Nigel Young, Gillian Akhtar, Sylvia Shatwell, Teresa Lappe-Osthege, Gina Greenley
Consultants:	Antonela Melonari, Tom Phillips

Support our work?

Our successful and enjoyable Summer Programmes and their extension into all three countries depend entirely on funding from donations.

Donations can be made on line at:

www.justgiving.com/balkanspeacepark or by cheque to Balkans Peace Park Project, sent to Hon Treasurer B3P, The Camp, Gladestry, Kington HR5 3NY

Get involved?

We are always interested to hear from people who might be able to help on our current projects.

Please check our website www.balkanspeacepark.org for our latest volunteer requirements



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