MOS MA PREK VALBONËN!
“HANDS OFF VALBONA!”

We may be a small organization in far away UK but we feel it is right in this issue of the B3P UK’s newsletter to highlight what is happening in Valbona. This spectacularly beautiful valley is central to the official, government designated Valbona National Park and an integral part of the whole Balkans Peace Park Project, yet it is being desecrated by monster hydroelectric schemes. Despite vigorous protest and high level legal appeals by local people and international concerns, licenses were granted to construction companies with ownership as far away as Canada for the building of maybe 14 hydropower points on the 25km of the Valbona river. And a massive tunnel will take water from the Çerem side valley. Çerem village and valley, a crucial point on the increasingly popular “Peaks of the Balkans” trail will be depopulated and destroyed.
“Without water, how can we live?”

Since construction started in 2016, communities on the river near Dragobia have had their drinking water supply disrupted. At a December 2017 meeting with the American Ambassador Donald Lu and diplomats from several other countries Dragobia and Valbona residents described how they can only get water in buckets from the river which is polluted by construction activity, and their lives are disrupted by the constant flow of huge construction vehicles. How could all this be allowed to happen in a National Park set up to conserve the environment? How will it affect the tourist trade which Valbona has developed so successfully in recent years?

Contacts

To keep in touch with what is happening and to join their campaigns you can go to www.toka-albania.org and http://www.journeytovalbona.com/good/river-initiatives/

A similar story in southern Albania

The Vjosa river system in southern Albania is or was a the largest free-flowing system in Europe outside Russia, unique because all its tributaries are or were free flowing too. It is of great environmental importance and the EU has been pressing the Albanian government to make it a national park. However, it is threatened by hydro schemes on a massive scale. On Albanian territory, 31 dams are projected in the Vjosa catchment. Along the Vjosa main channel, the Ministry of Energy intends to build 8 dams, 23 additional HPPs (Hydro Power Projects) on her tributaries, 4 of which are already finished while another 4 are currently under construction. Albania’s Administrative Court, which in November 2016 actually allowed the Valbona scheme to go ahead, did stop a major scheme for a dam and lake at Poçem on the lower reaches of the river. That decision is, of course, being appealed by the Turkish construction companies. One site already affected is here on the river Bençë near Permet where thermal springs make it an almost unique attraction for mountain visitors. Endrit Shima (Zbulo) took this classic photo in April 2015 when guiding a B3P trekking group. We had been swimming in the river until minutes before the goats arrived. The flow of the river has now been reduced to a mere trickle. To learn more, go to the very informative website www.balkanrivers.net/en/key-areas/vjosa-river

What has all this got to do with B3P UK?

For us as a group and as individuals one of the great joys of the mountain areas of the three countries that make up B3P is being involved in ways to help protect what are often called Europe’s last wilderness areas, places where the intensive development in the rest of Europe had not reached. One of the original aims of the B3P project in 2001 was to prompt and help develop the concept of cross-border trekking to bring income into the valley communities and reduce their depopulation. We like to think that our influence from 2003 lay behind the German organization GIZ and local activists establishing the Peaks of the Balkans trail in 2012. A very successful initiative which we are delighted to recognize.
Protecting a unique environment

The second of our original aims, to prompt cross-border cooperation between communities to protect the environment was obviously going to take longer to develop. Things have changed; the whole of the proposed B3P area is now encompassed in four national parks: Thethi/Kelmend and Valbona in Albania, Prokletije in Montenegro and Bjeshkët e Nemuna in Kosovo/a. There will probably be a number of local initiatives and instances of cross-border cooperation at community level quietly going on which don’t make big news, but if only we could believe that there is a drive at government level in all three countries towards a statutory international conservation area, whether a “Peace Park” or not. Would the Albanian government have been able to get away with allowing all these destructive hydroelectric schemes if the whole B3P region was one such major international cooperative conservation ‘park’?

2. B3P 2016 – 2017

Chairperson Jen Dyer’s Review of the year

2016 - 17 was a challenging year for the organization with many difficult decisions to be made given the reduction in funding and capacity. Having said that, we came out of it with a lively strategy meeting in London in April and a successful Summer Programme in Lëpushë, August 13th to September 2nd. A fantastic piece of original research there really highlighted the current context of that Albanian village, the continuation of our work from a different angle, with guesthouses and tourism development in the area and the promise of follow up next year.

Summer Programme 2017

At a well attended strategy meeting in London in April 2017 we made some important decisions about the Summer Programmes for the year. We decided to hold only one SP and for that to be in Lëpushë. Unfortunately, our budget and capacity did not allow for more than that. However, the SP seemed well received and input from local organizations such as Eco Albania and PPNEA (Protection and Preservation of the Natural Environment in Albania) increased the value and relevance for the students involved. Jonid Sula and Klejd Kosta, Albanian volunteers from Tirana, did a wonderful job of organizing the logistics and Jamie Dixon did a fantastic job as International Coordinator. We had an amazing team of volunteers, including some more experienced members of the team such as Penny Munden and Ulrike Gös. We also had a team of five Sports students from Leeds Beckett University, stunning us with their preparation, creativity, initiative and adaptability. They produced some wonderful lessons as well as sporting activities for the two weeks. The range of students attending the SP was slightly unusual as we had plenty of youngsters (4 - 10), very few between 10 and 17, and then a group of young men between the ages of 17 and 35. I feel this is something we need to address if we carry on coordinating SPs as we may not be accessing all youngsters and girls may be being left out. The older boys also suggested they were there to learn English in order to leave for America.

Community Research Project – Tourism in Lëpushë

During the Summer Programme, lecturer Eleanor Jew and students from Leeds Beckett University’s Centre for Tourism & Hospitality Management carried out interviews with local residents on their attitudes to
tourism in Lëpushë. Their research report made some relevant remarks about the focus of the SPs and people’s perceptions as well as what we want to achieve from them. It raised a number of interesting and helpful issues which I think will be invaluable in planning our course ahead. Their entirely voluntary efforts in carrying out the research and producing the report deserve a great deal of praise and thanks!  (See item 6 below for details of the report. Ed.)

Regina Kroemer also investigated local tourism, it was meant to be a workshop and actually ended up being individual guesthouse visits, which brought a new and interesting element to the B3P activities. Regina has plans to follow up this work next year.

Standing down

I have decided to stand down as Chair of B3P UK. I found the year very challenging as I tried to balance B3P commitments with a sudden increase in workload in my day job as Lecturer in Sustainability in the Leeds University School of Earth and Environment. I also found it difficult to navigate the complexity of B3P’s history and the multitude of aims it is trying to achieve. This was somewhat reflected in my reticence and inability to keep the website and Facebook pages updated as I often wasn’t sure of what message we were trying to get across. I didn’t want to attract people to the organization who we couldn’t cater for. Although I understand we want to attract volunteers, it is crucial that we have clear roles for them that we can realistically deliver on. The SP this year was in danger of being overstaffed and this is not a fair situation for volunteers. Again, I think this is something that needs to be considered for the future.

My recommendation for my successor(s) is to try and narrow down the aim of the organization and create some solid roles for different people involved so that workload is spread and everyone is delivering the same message about the organization. It would also be beneficial to use the research Ellie and others have done to work out the most effective use of B3P resources in the region. This will also help with approaching potential funders if relevant.

I very much look forward to seeing where the organization goes from here and how we build on the achievements of the past year. There are huge strengths to draw on in B3P, not least the commitment and extraordinary expertise of the longstanding committee members, the enthusiasm and dedication of the active members in Albania and the vast range of knowledge and passion across the B3P network. I would like to thank everyone who helped, supported, guided and kept me sane over the last year’s rollercoaster.

(We thank Jen very much indeed for taking on the role of Chairperson last year and we are sad that she couldn’t continue. We’ll miss her exuberance and lively interest in B3P. Ed.)

3. AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM TAKES OVER

At the AGM in Leeds on December 2nd we elected an exciting new team to take us forward. We now have joint Chairpersons: Kelsey Aho and Teresa Lappe-Osthege, and Secretary Ulrike Göß. Not only do we now have Teresa and Ulrike from Germany and Kelsey from the US at our head but, dare we say it, with their youthful vigour they will considerably reduce the average age of the committee!
Kelsey Aho

Kelsey first volunteered with B3P Summer Programmes in 2012 in Vermosh and Lëpushë. Inspired, she co-coordinated three of the Summer Programmes in 2014 in Peje (Kosovo), Plav (Montenegro), and Vermosh and Lëpushë (Albania). She volunteered in Valbona, Vermosh, and Plav in 2015. Her interest in B3P stems from the fact that her family moved from Sisak in Croatia to the US in the 1990s during the time of tumult and uncertainty. By day, Kelsey works in Corvallis, Oregon, USA, for the joint Regional Environmental Center of Central and Eastern Europe, a US Environmental Protection Agency project

http://www.rec.org/project-detail.php?id=30. At weekends, she harvests berries, nuts, flowers and leaves for tea, tends a large cabbage patch, throws ceramic pieces and volunteers as a whale watcher with Oregon Parks.

Teresa Lappe-Osthege

Teresa first worked with B3P in Theth (Albania) in the summer of 2013. Having become interested in the region, its warm-hearted people and breath-taking landscape, she returned to the B3P area in 2014 and 2015 to conduct research into the advantages and disadvantages of transboundary community-based conservation in the national parks. As a co-Chair, Teresa looks forward to deepening ties with organizations and individuals in the region to work towards a common goal: the establishment of a Transnational Park. Originally from Germany and a political scientist by training, Teresa is now based in Sheffield UK, where she is studying for a PhD. The photo shows Teresa in action in the Summer Programme in Thethi in 2013.

Ulrike Göss

Ulrike, who comes from Hamburg, was a volunteer on all the Summer Programmes (SPs) in 2016: Rugova (Kosovo/a), Valbona, Lëpushë, Vermosh and Babino Polje and Grbaje (Montenegro). She was back again for Lëpushë in 2017. She has also done some mountain trekking from Vermosh with Jonid (Tirana). At the time of writing this, Ulrike is on her way to visit Lëpushë in winter with Jonid. A Truly ardent B3P supporter!

Co-Chairs’ Statement – December 2017

Following their appointment the team wrote this statement for all B3P members:

“During 2018, we will focus on regional and local developments related to the establishments of the transboundary conservation area with the aim of creating the formal foundations for the Peace Park. B3P will continue to support local communities and individual researchers by re-establishing relationships with organisations and individuals in the B3P area. However, given the serious constraints on human and financial resources this year, this might not take the form of Summer Programmes. Instead, the UK-team will focus on building international partnerships, political advocacy, and compiling the necessary scientific research to drive forwards the formal establishment of the Balkans
Peace Park. The formal involvement of the local and regional affiliates will gradually increase in the efforts to advance the establishment of the Balkans Peace Park.

Recent interest in building large scale infrastructure and tourism developments in the already protected areas has reminded us of the necessity to push for the formal recognition of the transboundary conservation area in order to empower its local communities and protect its biodiversity.

4. LËPUSHË SUMMER PROGRAMME 2017

Thank you Jonid Sula and Kleid Kosta for sending this report. (It is included here as they wrote it with as few changes as possible. Ed.)

The summer program where it co-operated in 4 directions.

1. Jen Dyer, Jami Dixon, and Leeds Beckett University students (English, Sports, Games) with team leader Emily Stevenson.

In this project they created an enabling environment to strengthen the organization working in this area, to improve the quality of volunteering, to assess the work of volunteers, and to raise awareness of the value and importance of volunteering in the area. After constant calls from residents of the area, it was very important for the continuity of our B3P organization being present in the area again this year.

Since the first day of the programme, the students expressed their willingness to be involved, and this is seen by the high number of participants, 27 people, compared with the small number of residents in the community. Thanks to the great willingness of volunteers participating, students learned basic elements of English so that they could communicate with different tourists who visit this area. Having training and discussions on the topics discussed increased their level of knowledge and awareness of English

Realization of topics prepared by the specialists of our professional staff, pushed the young participants to avoid vices and problems of age as an important condition for the education of the younger generation, and the strengthening of moral values and personality.
Meetings with the aim of engaging young people to contribute to the development of tourism in the municipality in cooperation with state and private institutions made it possible to get new ideas, leading to increased cooperation in the future. Another long-term impact achieved was the creation of a positive atmosphere and incentive for young people through this project in Lëpushë, a project which was made possible thanks to the support of B3P UK.

Activities took place inside the primary school “Lucë Agraja”, Lëpushë, during the mornings and also in the grounds outside the school.

2. Eko Albania and PPNE (Protection and Preservation of the Natural Environment in Albania) members worked with students, discussing environmental problems, the Albanian law on wildlife protection, forest conservation for future generations, and the need for proper treatment of garbage in the context of sustainable development.

3. Ellie Jew, Ulrike, Doruntina Isufaj and Jonid, conducted interviews in households in the area. (See Ellie’s report below.) Doruntina from Peja has been an SP volunteer in Valbona in 2015 and in Kosovo/a in 2016.

4. Regina Kroemer (third week) Regina is from Germany, a Business Management Lecturer. Her individual project was a course for getting to know tourists’ needs & learning about costs and prices. Its objective was to develop a tourism survey and learn how it could be analysed to inform further development. Additionally, it would assess cost structure and prices for sustainable economic success. The course was aimed at adults and ran for 1 week, 2 – 3 hours/day.

Its conclusions were that in order to have economic success in the long run it is necessary to have products that:

- are in line with the wishes of tourists
- maintain the natural environment as a basis for tourism and are offered in an economically sustainable manner.

The first part of the course took place in the last week of August 2017. From then on, owners of guest houses in Lëpushë will be supported until Summer 2018 when the second part of the course will take place.

5. BLOG: SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN LËPUSHË, ALBANIA

by Emily Stevenson (Leeds Beckett University)
My time in August 2017 volunteering with the organization B3P, alongside a brilliant group of Leeds Beckett student volunteers, brought me to the remote mountain village of Lëpushë, Albania. Set against the beautiful backdrop of the Albanian Alps, Lëpushë is an emerging small-scale tourism destination with ‘great potential’ – increased by the recent improvements to the winding road up to the Alps, making access to the area a whole lot easier. Yet, as with many destinations, Lëpushë faces a number of challenges – and whether an increase in tourism offers the answer...well, that’s not an easy question.

This year, alongside running a two-week summer school in Lëpushë, the Balkans Peace Park Project (commonly known as B3P) aimed to evaluate their work and to understand how they could better support local communities’ needs in the future. This involved research into the main issues within the area, through informal interviews with community members, and various workshops with young people. The full report will be available online but the musings, and a little bit of an insight, of a Responsible Tourism student are provided here. Interviews with community members revealed the difficulties of being in such an isolated area, such as a lack of employment opportunities, poor government provision, and long, harsh winters where it is sometimes difficult to leave the house. And with tourism accounting for only five months of the year, that still leaves villagers to struggle by for the remaining seven. Many of the older residents spoke of how more and more of the younger generation are leaving Lëpushë; indeed, chatting with the young adults in class, it was hard to find anyone keen to remain in this village plagued by outward migration - and the temptation of the ‘American Dream’.

As a fresh-faced Masters student, I was surprised by the young people’s disconnection with their area. Discussing some of the environmental issues in Lëpushë, such as poor waste disposal and deforestation, it was clear that young people were aware of the problems, but felt disempowered to do anything about it. B3P attempted an asset-based approach to the workshops, by encouraging young people to think of creative and realistic solutions to improve Lëpushë, aided by the sharing of best practice examples of social enterprises and agri-tourism ventures elsewhere. Despite this, I sensed a lack of commitment to the area, which left me thinking, if young people really do want to leave Lëpushë who are B3P to convince them to stay?

Having said that, conversations with various guesthouse owners suggested that there are a cohort of residents keen to ride the tide of tourism; they are making adjustments to accommodate an increase of tourists accordingly. Few people seem worried about the negative impact of mass tourism, and from our experiences, guesthouses are generally standardised with little differentiation to appeal to a range of tourists. Perhaps then, B3P’s role could involve working more long term with locals who do want to stay in the area, to help develop varied and sustainable tourism opportunities that keep a gentle wave of tourists coming back every year.
Whatever happens in the future, I think B3P’s research and community engagement this year has been crucial. While it is tempting to rush in to Lëpushë, shouting, “Tourism is the answer!”, what is more important is to take a big step back and reflect - “But wait, what exactly is the question?”

6. LËPUSHË IN 2017 AND BEYOND - COMMUNITY INTERVIEW REPORT
By Dr. Eleanor Jew, Teaching Fellow, Sustainability Research Institute,
Leeds University School of Earth and Environment

Summary and Recommendations

The Balkans Peace Park Project (B3P) has been working in the communities of northern Albania since 2003. To inform the development of a future programme for the organization, B3P commissioned a survey in 2017 to identify the main issues and opportunities within the Lëpushë community. Interviews were conducted which identified 10 main themes in the area, ranging from issues associated with outward migration, the state of the education system and the future of the area. B3P could play an important role in three main ways:

1. Advocacy to help the community obtain secure land tenure and develop a land use management plan. The newly sealed road up to Lëpushë could lead to rapid development which will need to be controlled in the interests of local people and the environment.
2. Assistance with the collection of rubbish.
3. Continued provision of Summer Programmes.

B3P has a positive relationship with residents and is a trusted international organization in the region.

7. STRATEGIC ACTIONS FOR 2018 —— SUMMER PROGRAMMES 2018?
A message from Co-chairs Kelsey and Teresa

During 2018, we will focus on regional and local developments related to the establishments of the transboundary conservation area with the aim of creating the formal foundations for the Peace Park. B3P will continue to support local communities and individual researchers by re-establishing relationships with organizations and individuals in the B3P area. However, given the serious constraints on human and financial resources this year, this might not take the form of Summer Programmes. Instead, the UK-team will focus on building international partnerships, political advocacy, and compiling the necessary scientific research to drive forwards the formal establishment of the Balkans Peace Park. The formal involvement of the local and regional affiliates will gradually increase in the efforts to advance the establishment of the Balkans Peace Park.

Recent interest in building large scale infrastructure and tourism developments in the already protected areas has reminded us of the necessity to push for the formal recognition of the transboundary conservation area in order to empower its local communities and protect its biodiversity.
**GOAL 1** To devise and communicate a Strategic Action Plan of short and long-term goals

**GOAL 2** To re-establish relationships with local organizations and individuals

**GOAL 3** To advance the establishment of the Balkans Peace Park

### 8. CROSS BORDER TREKKING 2017

Cross border trekking is now a thriving business in the B3P region, as Richard Hargreaves (B3P) could see and hear about on his own trek in July 2017. The Peaks of the Balkans Trail (PoB) is attracting more and more people each year, both independent travellers and groups organized by local agencies such as Zbulo (Tirana) and Kosova Outdoor (Peja). Several British outdoor travel agencies now offer their own versions of a trek in the region, e.g. KE, Exodus and Walks Worldwide who were the first to venture into Thethi and Valbona in 2011 or 2012. On Qafa Pejës, between Vuthaj and Thethi, Richard met a group on Ramblers Worldwide Holidays’ first ever trek in the region, an ambitious route which climbed Mt. Korab (outside B3P on the border with Macedonia) and Maja Kolatës on their way north into Montenegro. All this is bringing income into the valley communities. Guesthouse accommodation has to be booked well in advance, guides are busy and almost daily in the season between June and September a caravan of horses sets out early from Thethi to bring trekkers’ baggage from the end of the road in the Ropojana valley above Vuthaj over Qafa Pejës to Thethi or vice versa.

**Lëpushë and Vermosh**

As always, a successful development like the PoB trail brings its own problems as well as benefits. Paths become eroded, the waymarking needs updating and the map needs revision, litter and waste disposal becomes a big issue and people who live near but not on the main trail become aggrieved that they are not included. This applies to the communities of Lëpushë and Vermosh which feel they are being by-passed. In fact, Lëpushë is on a fine trekking route from Grbaje in Montenegro and down to Tamarë or over to Thethi and both communities could do well out of cycle tourism, especially if a cycle business was developed in Plav/Gusinje. In the summer of 2017 Ulrike Göös and Jonid Sula went exploring in the mountains north of Vermosh on a trek of their own. They felt that this area would benefit from being included in B3P and would be an attractive extension.

**A fairly typical B3P trek**

For readers of this newsletters who have not enjoyed the pleasures of cross-border trekking here below is very brief summary, originally written for another purpose, of Richard and Jane’s trek with four friends from the UK Fell and Rock Climbing Club in July 2017. It could help to give an insight into the trekking. The reference to music comes from Richard’s “dream” of bringing a group of singers/musicians who also like mountain walking to sing and play traditional tunes and

[Image of Jane near Qafa Pejës]
popular songs on their way from Peja to Thethi. **This is going to happen in June 2018**, so if you don’t want to hear our music you will have to keep out of our way!

Our 15 day holiday was on what is now a fairly standard cross-border trek in the range of the Balkans Peace Park Project (B3P), from Peja and the Rugova valley in Kosova, over to Plav and the Grbaje valley in Montenegro, then the classic crossing to Thethi in Albania before a final day over to Valbona, followed by the traditional ferry ride down hydroelectric reservoir Lake Koman on the unique Dragovia bus-boat. A night in the city of Shkodër, then a minibus journey on the still new Tirana – Pristina highway for 24 hours in the splendid Ottoman town of Prizren in Kosova before the Wizzair flight back from Pristina to Luton and a gruesome night drive up the M1 to Leeds.

Nicely warm and sunny mountain weather all the way, amazing flowers, spectacular mountains and valleys, some other people around but not too many, 3 peaks, 4 mountain passes, 6 walking days of 6 to 9 hours, 4 travel and ‘culture’ days, 3 active ‘rest’ days, baggage transfer by vehicle or horse (Albania), 6 town nights, 7 nights in farm guesthouses, one night in ‘mountain maverick’ Fatos Lajci’s Hajla cabin 2000m. Food? Super, mostly in the Slow Food movement of home-based produce and home-brewed ‘raki’. Music? No, but we did prompt one lively international evening of songs in English, Italian, German, Dutch and Albanian at the Shqiponja guesthouse on Drelaj.

Accommodation (still only 25 euros full board), transport, police permission for border crossing, guides, all arranged in advance by Lendita Hyseni at her own travel company Kosova Outdoor in Peja after I had told her what and where we wanted to go and do. Highly recommended.

Supper in Drelaj before singing. Photo R Ivens

“Mountain Minstrels” 2018? Route, venues and contacts are in place for a 12 day singing and playing mountain journey from Peja to Thethi. Between June 1th and 22nd. I have now had my bent fingers straightened and gathered a group of ukulele singers and a folk musician. We’re coming. Look out, even listen out for us! (Richard)

**9. BRAND NEW GUIDEBOOK!**

“Trekking the Peaks of the Balkans Trail”

by Rudolf Abraham
This beautifully produced guidebook was published by Cicerone Press in November 2017. £16.95 but maybe still available from Amazon at a bit over £12. Sadly there is no mention of B3P but otherwise there is a lot of background information to the region which is excellent. The linear description of the route is as good as such a thing can be but is no substitute for the 1:60,000 map. Usefully, the book indicates where the route now diverges from the map and where information has changed since the map came out in 2012. All in all it is great reading for anyone interested in the B3P area, even if you don’t do the walking. Well done, Rudolf!

10. CONGRATULATIONS TO:

Pavlin Polia and Vlora on the birth of their son Arian in October 2017, their third child. Pavlin and Vlora run a unique mountain guesthouse in Thethi. After the original house burnt down in 2015 a new one was miraculously built and opened a year later with 35 beds in 2016 and was extended with a dining room and kitchen in 2017. They continue to offer a real family welcome, especially to mountain walkers and trekkers.

and

Antonela Melonari on the birth of her son Lewis in January 2018. Antonela, Albanian and living and working in London, is a longstanding and active supporter of B3P.

Welcome to Arian and Lewis, B3P supporters and activists of the future!

AND MORE CONGRATULATIONS TO:

KOSOVA ITSELF

on the 10th anniversary of its declaration of independence in February 2008, with all our best wishes for a peaceful, democratic, corruption-free future and a resolution of the disputed borders, especially over the beautiful Čakor pass between Rugova and Montenegro.

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Support our work?

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

Donations can be made preferably 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 join in our work from the UK or help on our current projects
in the Balkans.

Please check our website www.balkanspeacepark.org

or

our Facebook www.facebook.com/B3PBalkansPeaceParkProject