

# ***CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN REVIEW***

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**ESTABLISHING THE BALKANS PEACE PARK (ALBANIA, MONTENEGRO AND  
KOSOVA/O).  
OVERCOMING CONFLICTS THROUGH NEGOTIATION ON CROSS-BORDER  
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION.**

**By**

**Antonia Young**

**University of Bradford, UK and Colgate University, USA**

## **Abstract**

*The paper outlines the plan to establish the first Balkans Peace Park (B3P) on the borders of Albania, Montenegro and Kosova/o. This project is at the cutting edge of both peace and environmental agendas. Being concerned with an area of outstanding natural beauty which is hard to access, and also involving co-operation between government authorities in three different countries, the project's realisation is also particularly challenging.*

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**Introduction**

It has been said that ‘borders constitute the main cause of wars ... neighboring countries are the most prone to fight. The danger of violence creeps around borders’.<sup>1</sup> Despite considerable skepticism initially, a peace park covering a wide geographical area has been developing for the past decade in the area surrounding the meeting point in the high remote mountains of Kosova/o, Albania and Montenegro. Each of the three aspires to EU membership. There are already many individuals, NGOs, and local and national authorities engaged in ongoing relevant projects within the area, as well as dialoguing across the borders. *Transboundary Protected Areas for Peace and Co-operation*, a publication produced by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), lists over 600 such regions and defines peace parks as ‘transboundary protected areas that are formally dedicated to

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<sup>1</sup> S.Rudiger, ‘Political and Cultural Borders in Europe’, *ABLAK*, March/April, 2002, p. 2.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and to the promotion of peace and co-operation'.<sup>2</sup>

**Image 1. Crossborder peaks. The view from Kosova/o towards Montenegro and Albania.**



*Photo by Fatos Lajçi.*

My own interest in the region dates back to my first extensive visit to the six republics of the former Yugoslavia in 1958. The Yugoslavia I've known most of my life has of course disintegrated and with it much interest in the 70-year experiment of a country apparently gaining stability under Tito's leadership for almost four decades. An early theorist supporting the Balkans Peace Park project was Professor Nigel Young—at the time Research Professor of Peace Studies at Colgate University in upstate New York. Deeply influenced by growing up

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<sup>2</sup> By Trevor Sandwith, Clare Shine, Lawrence Hamilton and David Sheppard, Cardiff University, *Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series no. 7*, p.3.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

among relatives devastated by World War II, his pursuit of peace research has been life-long.<sup>3</sup> The idea was also independently conceived by at least two individuals in Albania and Kosova/o. Besides those living in the regions, there are also groups of concerned people working in support of this unified initiative all over Europe as well as in the USA.

**Image 2. Thethi school children, 2008.**



According to the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) a Park for Peace is a symbolic place where a war was prevented or a peace signed, and as such it is not a new concept. The creation of one here, in the single mountain range on the borders of Kosova/o, Northern

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<sup>3</sup> He is currently editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of World Peace*, due for publication with Oxford University Press, NY, in 2009.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

Albania and Montenegro, unites local inhabitants, environmentalists and peace-workers including those working on the reconciliation of bloodfeuds. The peace park seeks to realize László Kürti's comment that, we must make borders insignificant.<sup>4</sup>

**Image 3. Crossing the peaks.**



*Photograph by Richard Hargreaves.*

In one of the most beautiful and untouched areas of high natural habitat in Europe, an important aim is also to preserve this place of outstanding natural beauty, in the process contributing towards peace and stability in the region, and promoting the growth of community

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<sup>4</sup> László Kürti, 'Borders, Regions, Frontiers: Where is Transylvania?' Paper presented at the international conference 'Cultural Encounters on the Eastern Frontiers of the EU', 10-11 June, 2005, at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

between different ethnic and religious groups. Interest in this peace park has already been stimulated in Peć/Peje, Plav, Podgorica, Shkodra, Tirana, and elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> although, as Franz Stummann observed, ‘Politicians don’t see what’s happening on the borders.’<sup>6</sup>

### **Location of the peace park**

The exact boundaries and locations of specific interest, the means of monitoring the diversity of flora and fauna and the exact activities to be implemented will remain under continuous discussion. Helen MacBeth has pointed out the ‘honey pot phenomena’ regarding who takes up the challenge.<sup>7</sup> In connection with the Balkan Peace Park, there are committees of interested persons engaged in several projects. A charitable organization from the UK which I chair,<sup>8</sup> attempts to facilitate a number of these schemes and to involve all three regions equally, leaving the decision-making to those whose lives are the most deeply affected by it, and working to preserve locations of cultural, religious and historical importance.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, report by Dritan Shala, ‘Rozafati Vellazeror’ (Brothers of Rozafat) and subheading ‘Pamja Mahnitese e Thethit, Parkut të Paqes’ (View of Mahnit and Theth—Peace Park), in *Dukagjini*, Kosova, July 2001, pp. 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Franz Stummann, keynote presentation ‘European Integration and Intercultural Encounters Through Inter-regional Co-operation’. Paper presented at the international conference ‘Cultural Encounters on the Eastern Frontiers of the EU’, 10th June, 2005, Bristol, University of the West of England.

<sup>7</sup> In her chapter ‘The Creation of New National Park Areas in Scotland’ (see Peter Simonić (ed.), *Ethnography of Protected Areas: Endangered Habitats—Endangered Cultures*. University of Ljubljana Press, Slovenia, 2006), MacBeth explains how, once the idea gains ground, everyone expects to get their share of the wealth.

<sup>8</sup> The First Balkan Peace Park Project, founded in 2000, Charitable Registration no. 1105447.

**Image 5. Location of the project.**



*The park's possible borders are marked in pink pen.*

Albania in particular, and also Kosova/o, have long been known to be extraordinarily religiously tolerant.<sup>9</sup> Montenegro, has a more homogenous religious population (Orthodox) and has not had the same challenges to face—except on its borders with Kosovo/a and Albania, home to its Albanian population which is mostly Muslim.

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<sup>9</sup> A.Young, 'Religion and Society in Present-Day Albania', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, (1999), pp. 5-16.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

**Image 4. Theti Church**



*Photograph by Antonia Young.*

Since this is seen as primarily a rural project, its area will not include towns—a decision which in turn somewhat dictates the project’s own borders. Hence it should be east of Shkodra, north of Bajram Curri, west of Gjakova/Gjakovica and Pejë/Peć, and south of Berane. This sets a natural limit to the area within any network of main roads, also limiting the travel within the park, a place of strong traditional values.

Looking at the situation positively, the slow pace of the region’s development has permitted the preservation of ancient cultures and traditions, as well as the flourishing of a variety of flora and fauna. On the other hand, recent military disturbances have left a legacy of

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

landmines on the borders, refugees, traumatized people and high unemployment leading to migration to towns and the resulting depopulation of the countryside. In addition, ongoing bloodfeuds in Albania are paralyzing whole families, even villages. There has also been an impact due to the sudden surge of international attention which occurred in 1999, along with the need to deploy immense resources quickly to areas where refugees were arriving. Then, almost as suddenly, these resources and attention were withdrawn, resulting in further disillusionment, migration and concerns about refugee returns.

The B3P is working with strong support from the United Nations Environmental Protection Department (based in Vienna), and also from the Austrian, Swiss and Dutch governments. The B3P is collaborating with many existing projects, e.g. *Euronatur*, the *Vermosh Community of Kelmend*, the *Shkoder Lake Project*, *Oxfam's Village Structures*, *The National Mission for the Reconciliation of Bloodfeuds*, and with other NGOs and charities which enhance rural and cultural life in the area. In Montenegro, the B3P has communications with the *Ministry for Environmental Protection and Spatial Planning* and the Republic's *Institute for Nature Protection*. It is also in discussion with other government agencies in all three countries. It has dialogue with the *Institute for Nature Conservation in Belgrade*, as well as the Head of the *Montenegrin Economy and Environment Section of the Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe* (OSCE). The Kosovar *Ministry of the Environment* has been particularly supportive and sent representatives to several meetings of the Balkan Peace Park (in London, Yorkshire and Italy); they and others from the three regions also came to visit the Yorkshire Dales National Park to see how private ownership can exist within a national park. Recognition

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

by two major international bodies has encouraged B3P's work: the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the *Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme* (UIAA). The former in particular sets out guidelines for promoting protected areas and peace parks.<sup>10</sup> Although the Institute for Nature Conservation in Belgrade conducted research on environmental issues in the Prokletija region of Montenegro for over a decade, its pursuit came to a standstill during the recent Balkan wars. In June 2005, Europe's fourth IUCN office was opened in Belgrade. The B3P forms a section of the European Green Belt: Gorbachev's vision of turning the Iron Curtain into an environmentally protected ribbon running through Europe from Finland to the Adriatic.<sup>11</sup> The European Green Belt is associated with IUCN and has offices in Budapest.

The three particular regions which concern us are the Rugova region of western Kosova/o, the Montenegrin Prokletija Park,<sup>12</sup> and the Thethi National Forest Park in northern Albania. Initial links through roundtables concerning the biological monitoring of birds, fish, flora and fauna within the area have already begun. We are working to facilitate joint meetings with those who have years of experience in similar habitats in order to pool knowledge and to share expertise on biological monitoring. In each of these three areas much work has already been done in terms of mapping and documenting flora and fauna, but much still remains to be

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<sup>10</sup> For a very extensive list of such projects worldwide, see Appendix I from Sandwith et al. op. cit. Dorothy Zbicz notes that there are 169 complexes of internationally adjoining protected areas containing 666 individual protected areas in 113 countries, p. 55-75.

<sup>11</sup> B3P contributed to the exhibition 'A Wider View: European Cultural Landscape Challenges' in Utrecht, which opened on 16th June, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Montenegro has four national parks: Biogradska Gora, Lovćen, Skadar Lake (bordering Albania) and Durmitor. In discussion with Montenegrin government ministers it became clear that, while they encourage outside investment in the Prokletija area, they do not have funding to support a fifth national park. There is also concern locally about how such nationalization might be detrimental to individual landowners.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

done. Scientists have brought out useful handbooks with simple maps indicating a division of the area of concern into three types of zone:

**Image 6. Plav Lake, Montenegro.**



*Photo by Tom Nicholson.*

*Zone A:* to be kept strictly as a Nature Reserve: not more than three quarters of the overall area. It may follow natural boundaries, such as rivers, streams, valleys, mountains and other distinctive peaks, hills, etc. and should be left entirely in the wild.

*Zone B:* General reserve of woods and pastures: to be left unspoilt, but to be used for controlled recreation. Here natural resources should be permitted for local consumption, but not for transportation and use elsewhere. This zone may be considered as the meeting point of man's co-existence with nature.

*Central and Eastern European Review*

**Image 7. Shepherds near Plega.**



*Photo by Anne Christine Eek.*

*Zone C:* Inhabited area: where rural life is sustained allowing inhabitants to live from non-intensive but improved agricultural production without hardship. Industry is not permitted here. This is the populated area where there are also historical and spiritual sites which enrich cultural life. The development of this zone enhances the region economically and improves its infrastructure. Such development allows for the traditional use of land and water, essential for proper breeding as well as the collection and processing of plants with medicinal value such as mushrooms, cranberries, mountain teas etc., which are all linked to the development of eco-

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

tourism. Thus carefully limited eco-tourism can be seen as a means to protect nature and to improve the standard of living of the local population.<sup>13</sup>

Considerable documentation has been gathered on flora, fauna, climate and terrain, as well as on suitability for a wide range of recreational activities.<sup>14</sup> The handbook on Rugova includes a section clarifying the effects of a decade of neglect under Communist rule during the 1990s (this had been a very popular sports and outdoor pursuits resort area prior to that period), as well as those of the war of 1999. Both the Montenegrin and the Kosovar handbooks outline work which needs to be done as a result of these environmental and human disasters.<sup>15</sup> Further careful documentation concerning post-conflict environmental damage with recommended remedies is provided in two UNEP publications.<sup>16</sup>

### **Addressing local attitudes to environmental issues and eco-tourism**

Sustainable use of the land has been hampered by a lack of co-ordinated legal parameters or even the effective attempt to find out and implement them.<sup>17</sup> These issues are currently being addressed for all the regions, but implementation is a goal yet to be achieved. Ecologically it is important to protect the area from destructive large-scale development, mass tourism and

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<sup>13</sup> From Regional Environmental Center Eko-Guide, *The Protection of Rugova's Environmental Assets*, pp. 31-51.

<sup>14</sup> See also Progni, Kolë, *Malësia e Kelmendit (The Mountains of Kelmendi)*. Tirana, 2000, pp. 242-48.

<sup>15</sup> Radović, Miljan and Marić Rejko, *Montenegrin Prokletije: Nature, People, Tourism, Development*, Ministry of Tourism of Montenegro, Institute of Economic Sciences Belgrade, Podgorica, 2002.

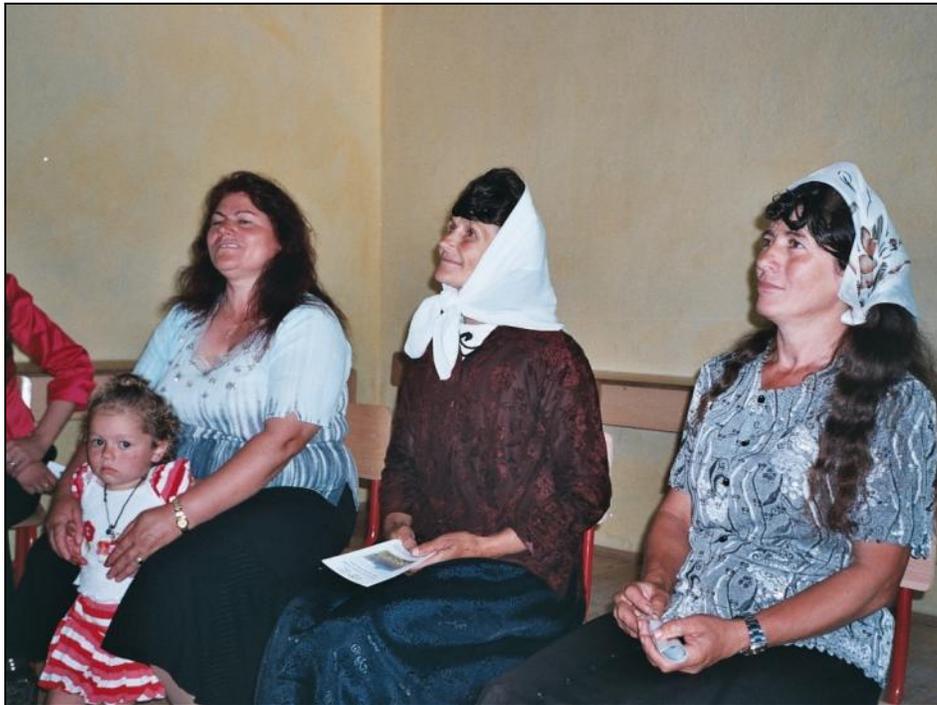
<sup>16</sup> *The Kosovo Conflict: Consequences for the Environment and Human Settlements, 1999*; and *Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment: Albania*, 2000. Both first published in Switzerland by the UN Environment Programme.

<sup>17</sup> At the UN conference 'Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development' in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, eleven programme areas were listed, all of which could be usefully employed in the Balkans Peace Park. See A/CONF.151/26(Vol. II), items 14.4, 13 August, 1992.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

external exploitation (e.g. the unregulated building of tourist hotels, extraction of minerals, logging, etc.—all of which have occurred to a certain extent in some areas).<sup>18</sup>

**Image 8. Women in Thethi, 2008.**



*Photograph by Bea Shelley.*

The project respects existing land ownership (though it is recognized that this is not currently without its own problems, especially in Albania where all land had been requisitioned and was owned by the state until 1991). Of considerable importance is care for existing and

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<sup>18</sup> Moličnik, Vesna and her students, Helena Dembsky and Aleš Lamut, gave a fascinating video presentation showing one example of poor tourist development in Croatia, ‘Transformation of a landscape into a meaningful experience: Photo safari on lower Neretva valley’, at the Symposium on Ethnography of Protected Areas, Pohorje, 18 Oct. 2003.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

improved agriculture and for endangered species. Somewhat in opposition to these goals, however, we must also consider the development of carefully limited hiking, biking, climbing, caving, mountaineering and fishing expeditions. Several of these activities require equipment for which rental facilities need to be developed. Tourist accommodation to support these activities needs to employ strict standards for building work (e.g. using only local labor and materials to construct simple lodges—good examples may be found in some places in Montenegro). Ideally they should take the form of small-scale family-run lodges, be placed only in existing settlements preferably renovating or improving existing structures, and ensure that all undeveloped areas be preserved in their natural states.

**Image 9. Excavations at the Bronze Age site.**



*Photograph by Ann Christine Eek.*

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

In northern Albania, the B3P collaborated with an exciting archaeological initiative (the Shala Valley project) during a three year period which has brought added interest to the region, especially with the identification of a large Bronze Age site.<sup>19</sup> There has been a move to help locals renovate some of their fine stone buildings which have fallen into disrepair after owners migrated out of the region. With sufficient resources it should be possible to ensure that traditional styles are preserved. In the Rugova region there has been work done converting disused shepherds' huts into simple accommodation for walkers. Trekkers in 2003 were fortunate to be the first to stay in a newly constructed wooden lodge in the Montenegrin village of Božov (at the rate of 5 Euros per person), and were regaled by all the villagers who shared a plentiful dinner of delicious local foods around a bonfire.<sup>20</sup> This is a region where continuous habitation ceased after the 1999 war: now everyone migrates to the towns (Rožaje, Peja/Peć, etc.) for most of the year, returning to their old properties, crops etc. only during summer time.

Another important step is to walk the proposed boundaries. This has already been partially undertaken by the truly remarkable travel writer and runner, Rosie Swale.<sup>21</sup> She flew into Skopje on 11th April 2001 (despite the tragic situation gripping that town at the time). She ran across the then closed border into Kosova/o, ran through Kosova/o (talking with people all

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<sup>19</sup> [www.millsaps.edu/svp/](http://www.millsaps.edu/svp/)

<sup>20</sup> They were also very amused to learn the story behind the traditional-sounding song, sung by a young girl: she explained that it was a love-song relating how the lovers met—it was over the internet.

<sup>21</sup> Rosie Swale has written six books and numerous articles. Her achievements are truly remarkable, to mention a few: she sailed the Atlantic alone in a boat only 6 metres long (70 days); she rode two horses alone, the length of Chile (5,000 kms.—8 months). She has run, for charities, across Romania, Iceland, Cuba and in the Sahara Desert marathon, then Nepal. She is currently running round the world for charities, you can check her progress: [www.rosiearoundtheworld.co.uk](http://www.rosiearoundtheworld.co.uk).

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

along her route), and across a closed border into and through Montenegro. There she ran for 24 hours through deserted villages and deep snow until she found families with whom to discuss the project, and on into northern Albania where she visited the Thethi National Forest Park. It is hoped that eventually a symbolic monument will be placed at the point where the three countries meet.<sup>22</sup> Further research is currently being taken up through the Dutch government agency SNV to co-ordinate all existing projects and to work on the feasibility of all its aspects as well as the order of further activity.

**Image 10. Work on the waterfall trail in Rugova.**



*Photograph by ERA*

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<sup>22</sup> Chris Hoggett of Cheltenham, UK, an acclaimed artist with experience of working in nature reserves has offered to work in attempting to use sculptural features to incorporate co-operation from all groups, and especially including input from local artists. His work was chosen to represent peace for the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, UK. There is already a marker on the spot.

**Image 11. The Tri-Point: where Kosovo/a, Montenegro and Albania meet.**



*Photograph by Richard Hargreaves.*

### **The relevance of sustainable development**

The regions with which we are concerned are all rural areas which are suffering to a greater or lesser degree from migration.<sup>23</sup> Most of the communities have thrived in the past through small-scale agriculture, but now, depleted of manpower, and overtaken by mass-production, or deprived of the means to get their produce to markets, the remaining inhabitants are existing in conditions of great poverty, yet in areas of immense beauty and hence potential wealth.<sup>24</sup> In northern Albania

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<sup>23</sup> A similar situation was described at the Symposium on Ethnography of Protected Areas, Pohorje, Slovenia 16-18 October, 2003 by Augustin Coca Perez.

<sup>24</sup> In his paper in Andalusia. This was recognized in Northern Albania as early as 1928 by Stavre Frashëri, the highly educated guide to the American anthropologist, Carleton Coon. For Frashëri's detailed berating of poor land-use at

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

in particular, there are pockets of village life barely touched by the last century: accessible only on foot (a 4 or 5-hour walk), there are also subsistence farmers making their bare living in complete eco-harmony (though not content with their meager existence).<sup>25</sup>

Planning must also address the situation of bloodfeuds by supporting the many existing initiatives for their reconciliation. This concern relates mainly to Albania. Curiously, despite the prevalence of bloodfeuds affecting whole families, this is likely to be passed unnoticed by the outside visitor. Traditionally such families lived in *kullas*, which are Albanian domestic buildings which house extended families. The term also refers to tower structures in which families in feud took refuge. Once in feud, all the male members of a family were confined to the *kulla*, the only place they could be sure to be safe from the offended family's revenge attack, where honour demands that they kill any one male member of the offending family (women traditionally are not at risk). The ritual of bloodfeuds along with all the rigid laws by which the people of these mountain regions still claim to live, is codified within the communities and has been handed down orally through many centuries. We are helped in our understanding of traditional law in northern Albania by the compilation and publication of these laws, *The Kanun of Lek Dukagjini*, thanks to the 19th century Franciscan priest Shtjefën Gjeçov.<sup>26</sup> There have been other written *kanuns* (codes of law) for other areas. Albania's best known writer, Ismail Kadare, won the first international Booker prize in June 2005; this featured on the front page of

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the time, see his, *Through Mirdite in Winter*. East European Monographs, Boulder, 2002. Translated by Peter Prifti. Chapter 13 'How the Mirditë People Occupy Themselves', pp. 55-64.

<sup>25</sup> Discussion with Dr. Andrea Pieroni (ethno-botanist), after fieldwork in remote *stans*, July 2004. See also Andrea Pieroni et al, 'Traditional Phytotherapy of the Albanians of Lepushe, Northern Albanian Alps' in *Fitoterapia*, 76 (2005), pp. 379-399.

<sup>26</sup> *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* (The Code of Lek Dukagjini). New York: Gjonlekaj Publishing Co., 1989.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

*The Guardian*.<sup>27</sup> It is relevant to mention him in this context since his novel, *Broken April*, focuses entirely on the ritual action of bloodfeuds in northern Albania.<sup>28</sup>

**Image 12. Kulla at Theti.**



Returning to environmental issues, in some places land erosion or pollution from war or over-exploitation of land or timber, has made food production harder.<sup>29</sup> Water- and saw mills in use for centuries have been abandoned in many places in the last decade.<sup>30</sup> However, in most

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<sup>27</sup> *The Guardian*, 3 June 2005.

<sup>28</sup> London: Harvill, Harper-Collins, 1991; first published in Albania in 1980.

<sup>29</sup> As reported recently to have devastated Bialowieza forest, see 'Loggers rip into Poland's wild forest: government licence to fell ancient trees leaves trail of destruction', *The Guardian*, 29 August 2003.

<sup>30</sup> There are 4 remaining communal water-driven flour mills in Thethi northern Albania.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

places relatively low investment in crops and stock could yield results sufficient to stem the flow of migration, to encourage local livelihood, and start to build up the local economy. Neither does it need high levels of investment to renovate some of the abandoned buildings, a few at a time, to fit them out for simple summer accommodation for walkers, climbers and others, such as small museums displaying and selling local crafts. Those eco-tourists who like to enjoy outdoor holidays also enjoy simple homemade, homegrown organic produce and food (yoghurt, cheese, honey, vegetables in season, etc.). On short-term visits, there is a preference for simplicity, getting away from the vast array for imported, canned and packaged foods.<sup>31</sup> The Slow Food University in Italy promotes a return to traditional foods, and methods of cultivation, harvesting, processing, storing and cooking. They have invited the participation of two locals to promote the produce of Thethi, northern Albania, at the Terra Madre conference in Turin in October, 2008.

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<sup>31</sup> B3P has two copies of a 7-panel travelling exhibition currently on view at the Leeds Royal Armouries Museum in the UK compiled by Chris Rossi, a member of our B3P trek through its three regions. The exhibition reflects many of the wider issues facing the whole project. In July 2003 B3P linked together many of the disparate NGOs and individuals involved so far, by bringing a group of 36 international trekkers through the regions for 12 days, specifically to make personal contact and to demonstrate the feasibility of combining the needs of trekkers with the needs of isolated inhabitants in these magnificent pristine mountainous surroundings. This feels like an urgent activity, before the latter join so many who have gone before, in a flow of migration to urban areas in search of employment, forced by the inability to exploit their potential treasures (the rural settlements surrounded by beautiful and plentiful natural resources).

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

**Image 13. One of the working flour mills in Theti.**



*Photograph by Todd Walters.*

### **Other comparable projects**

As mentioned above, the International World Conservation Network (IUCN) has published a substantial guide listing over 600 protected border areas worldwide. These are just a few from all over the world (two of which also relate to Albania), for example: (a) the Scandinavian Morokulien Peace Monument. Established in 1914, this bridges Norway and Sweden to form one of the most significant demilitarized zones in the world. (b) The Glacier Peace Park on the borders of Canada and the USA which has the longest continuous border of all peace parks. It had its 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2007. (c) The Prespa Lake Project borders Greece, Macedonia and Albania. (d) The DMZ (demilitarized zone) is a ribbon of land running 155 miles across the entire Korean peninsula. It was established in 1953 to separate the two Koreas and to diminish hostile confrontation between

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

them. Here there are a limited number of experimental villages made up of families from North and South Korea living together in an environmentally-friendly manner.<sup>32</sup> (e) *Christ of the Andes* is located between Chile and Argentina, marking a reconciliation which was reached before major conflict even broke out. (f) The Dongola Limpopo Valley is found on the borders of Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. (g) As with the DMZ project proposal, Mikhail Gorbachev supports the protection of the site of the former Iron Curtain, which through 40 years of under-use became a refuge for plants and animals but is now threatened by logging and construction. He wants a nature reserve ‘along the full length of the former Cold War border, from Finland to the Adriatic’.<sup>33</sup> His dream is being realized by IUCN’s European Greenbelt, focusing on the ‘development of the former Iron Curtain from death zone to life line’.<sup>34</sup> (h) Monteverde in Costa Rica is one of the largest private reserves in the world, containing three small towns developed by a group of American Quakers in 1949. They founded a pacifist community here incorporating the existing local community; at the same time the government abolished its army.<sup>35</sup>

The Balkans Peace Park Committee has formed a UK charity which is made up of dedicated people, each with different specialist knowledge and abilities, all of whom are undertaking different kinds of outreach work.<sup>36</sup> Only the website manager is paid.<sup>37</sup> Most

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<sup>32</sup> See Ke Chung Kim, ‘Preserving Biodiversity in Korea’s Demilitarized Zone’, *Science* 10 October 1997, pp. 242-43.

<sup>33</sup> Otto Pohl, ‘Last chief of Iron Curtain now seeking a green one: Gorbachev wants nature to rule old border’, *International Herald Tribune* 28 July 2003.

<sup>34</sup> 8-12 September at Fertő-Hanság National Park, funded by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation. In 2006 there were plans for a high profile media trip traveling along the route of the Green Belt, identifying a path running the entire length of Europe.

<sup>35</sup> See Weinberg, A, Bellows, S and Ekster, D. ‘Sustaining Ecotourism: Insights and Implications from two Successful Case Studies’, *Society and Natural Resources*, volume 15, pp. 373-82.

<sup>36</sup> See note 8.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

members have visited the area, some many times. Additionally student interns have worked regularly in Albania and Kosovo/a every year since 2002. One who graduated in 2004 won a major award to spend a year studying six Peace Parks worldwide.<sup>38</sup> In 2004 a B3P Committee member organised a 2-week bike-trek through the same regions as the 2003 trek on foot. In 2005 a larger trek on foot followed a similar route, and an even more ambitious one was organized in 2007. These have been followed by several more, with increased numbers planned in the coming year.

Richard Hargreaves, a member of several trekking groups and BPP committee member, wrote of the potential of the northern Albanian mountains:

The spectacular mountains consist of rocky peaks and ridges up to 2,700m with snow on northern faces (in May), clothed in dense, brilliant green beech scrub and trees merging into more widely spaced pine trees which reach up into the crags and onto the horizons. In the Thethi valley there are both scenes of dereliction: ruins of collective farm buildings from the communist era, shiny metal roofs on some houses, some of Enver Hoxha's concrete mushrooms, etc. but also scenes of a perfect blend of building and landscape: stone built houses with roofs of large beech shingles, set among well tilled, terraced fields, orchards and dry stone walls, all against a backdrop of beech-clad crags and mountains ... (a) great attraction here would be walking through the mountains, on the ancient paths linking villages and valleys, each stage taking five to eight hours. Accommodation would be farmhouses, as in Theth.<sup>39</sup>

Colgate University funded internships in Albania and Kosovo/a allowing one or more students to spend two months in the summer working in the Peace Park area with local NGOs.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> [www.balkanspeacepark.org](http://www.balkanspeacepark.org)

<sup>38</sup> Lindsay MacKenzie, (Canadian) Colgate University '05 won a Watson award this year.

<sup>39</sup> 'Mountains for Peace in the Balkans', *The Great Outdoors*, pp. 34-38.

<sup>40</sup> In summer 2001, two worked with Young Intellectuals, Hope(IRSH) in Shkodra. Much of their work was teaching

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

The employment of these young people has the added advantage of making good links with the young locals who are eager for change. It is these local young people who are learning fast how to access funding to promote the kinds of activities outlined above. Between June and August 2008 several volunteers, both students and working people, participated in the Summer Programme in Thethi.<sup>41</sup> The programme was enormously successful and there are plans to repeat it in future years. It will be replicated in all three B3P regions, with one Programme in each, and three in each in 2010.

### **Problems to face**

Nick Oliver, another B3P committee member says the following about security:

There's a tension within the concept of a national park—on the one hand, access to the public; on the other hand, preservation of the environment ... with the demands of national security... (versus) ... a public right to wander freely across international borders.

On population migrations, and its effect on the ecosystem he notes:

A depopulated land is difficult to tend; it will become an almost impenetrable wilderness. This will preserve the flora and fauna, certainly, but at a cost of making them inaccessible

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English to young people who were later given opportunities to attend international conferences and meetings to develop their NGO's and to make international links. English has an important role as a neutral language when the use of any one local language may be either offensive or exclusionary to one or another participant at such meetings. Three more worked in the mountains west of Pejë/Peć (Kosova/o) in 2002, and in 2003 two were placed each in Pejë/Peć and Shkodra, assisting greatly on the trek. Yet more had placements in each of the years since then.

<sup>41</sup> The pilot programme ran for eight weeks, teaching English and Environmental Awareness to 50 children aged 8-18. A total of 83 children and young people aged 6-23 participated. Regarding the concerns of adults, there were weekend workshops on marketing sustainable tourism. A joint letter was drafted to a local authority requesting that the local electricity generator be repaired after its deterioration over several years. The letter elicited a positive response within weeks.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

to all but the dedicated professional. It will be difficult to mount a defence, then against commercial pressure for the area to be exploited—for wood, probably, in this case. A depopulated land is also good for cross-border criminal activity—there's less chance of being disturbed.<sup>42</sup>

Problems of 'open borders' may be solved by a strict enforcement of park boundaries by a neutral park authority liaising with international bodies. This would serve to curb negative development, and aid control of the environment. Negotiations at both governmental and local levels, and the identification of partners for tri-lateral involvement are well underway. It is hoped that we gain support from the EU, as a contribution towards a social policy program.<sup>43</sup>

Further problems include: the need to maintain co-operation at the governmental level while still allowing for decision-making to take place locally; the need to overcome the tendency to see the venture as being politically motivated; funding—at all levels; clarifying issues in landownership; on-going bloodfeuds; the need to define eco-tourism objectives; the difficulty of preserving local culture (with its systems of honour) when dealing with the wider world (which demands, for instance, transparency and written contracts); cases of local conflict can be exacerbated by the presence of outsiders; and increased external input can possibly decrease local initiative.

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<sup>42</sup> From Nick Oliver's presentation to the conference, 'Environmental Peace Across Borders', Shkodra 25 July, 2003.

<sup>43</sup> See for example, Gianluca Sambucini, 'Sustainable Development: the role of the UN and the UNECE regional approach', presentation for the Second UniAdriatic Graduate Summer School, Cervia Italy, 2003.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

### **Conclusion**

There is currently a real move by all stakeholders to act with commitment on this project. In Shkodra, Albania, on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> March 2008 more than sixty stakeholders from central government, regional government, municipalities, NGOs and other organisations from Albania, Kosovo/a and Montenegro attended a two-day workshop to plan the next steps towards the creation of this transboundary protected area. The meeting, which was hosted by the President of the Shkodra Regional Council (Qark), Professor Gjovalin Kolombi, opened with positive statements of support and optimism for the future from the ministerial representatives from each of the three countries involved. Particular delight was expressed by the representative from Kosovo/a, who was speaking for the first time on behalf of the newly independent republic. A draft vision, mission and objectives, tabled by the facilitators after prior consultation with various stakeholders, enabled productive discussions to take place in four working groups: economy and tourism; ecology; social and cultural issues; and capacity-building. Each group addressed the draft objectives step by step, identifying gaps and areas of agreement, in order to achieve consensus on practical steps towards the creation of a programme of action.<sup>44</sup> These further steps are now taking place rapidly.

Although there cannot be an immediate transformation of the area into a fully functioning peace park, the work is producing good results according to Dorothothy Zbicz's, IUCN approved 'Levels of co-operation between internationally adjacent protected areas'. The area's status is now

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<sup>44</sup> The meeting was supported by SNV, ENVSEC, UNEP, Canadian International Development Agency, Austrian Development Corporation and B3P-UK.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

certainly above level 0, and might even be reaching level 2. (The measures go up to Level 5 ‘full co-operation’ where a joint committee for management and advice on the specific area is in place.)<sup>45</sup> Currently we are working on the following IUCN objectives: obtaining additional resources; achieving a more coordinated management of the ecosystem; averting threats to the ecosystem; promoting nature-based tourism; increasing management effectiveness; continuing to involve communities at all levels; promoting peaceful coexistence; sustaining a programme of joint meetings; and maintaining free and open communication between all those involved in the three areas.

**Image 14. View of Kosova/o countryside: Roshkodol, above Isniq and Decani.**



*Photo by Ann Christine Eek.*

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<sup>45</sup> In Sandwith et al, op. cit, p.34. See Appendix 2.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

### **ENDNOTE**

This paper is developed from earlier work shared at meetings in Shkodra (2000) 3rd International Seminar ‘Shkodra through the Centuries’; Prishtina (2001) 20th International Seminar on Albanian Language, Literature and Culture; Forli, Italy (2002) Special Convention on ‘Nationalism, Identity and Regional Co-operation: Compatibilities and Incompatibilities’; Cervia, Italy (2003) Second UniAdriatic Graduate Summer School, course of specialization in sustainable development of agricultural, environmental and rural systems; ‘Whose Mountains are they anyway: Europe’s least visited’, Conference: Tourism and Literature, Travel, Imagination and Myth, Harrogate, UK (2004); ‘Update on the Cross-border Balkans Peace Park’ Seminar on Language, Literature and Culture, Prishtina (2004); ‘From Kullas, Canyons and Kanuns to Cultural Co-operation and Security’, Millsaps Forum, Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi, USA (2004); ‘Conflict prevention and environmental protection in the unique Alpine wilderness of the Balkans’ most inaccessible border areas: The Cross-border Balkans Peace Park (Albania/Montenegro/Kosovo/a)’, Conference: International Peace Research Association conference, 29 June - 3 July 2006, Calgary, Canada.

*Central and Eastern European Review*

**APPENDIX**

**Summer Programme 2008: *Voices from Thethi***

**Project Area: *Thethi National Park, northern Albania***

**Image 15. Summer Programme Graduation, 2008.**



**Background**

Whilst this area is one of Europe's most stunning mountain regions, and with one of the most distinctive cultural landscapes, it suffers from a wide range of socio and economic problems. Of

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

particular concern in connection with this project are: a very high level of depopulation, with (mostly younger) people from the local communities leaving for the urban centers of Tirana due to the lack of educational and employment opportunity; and a poor level of environmental awareness and protection.

### **Actions**

To address these issues, and as part of a wider programme of projects for the area within the proposed Balkans Peace Park area, the B3P ran a summer education programme, based in the state school in Thethi, over a period of 2 months during the summer of 2008 (primarily aimed at the younger generations within the Thethi region, but with modules for adult education as well) with the purpose of:

1. providing English language skills with an emphasis on phrases that would be useful in communicating with visitors to the area. As a pilot project the intention is to build on this in future years and extend it to other villages in the region, especially with a view to promoting peace across the borders of the Balkans Peace Park, where there is no common language, and English serves as the *lingua franca*.
2. promoting awareness of the local environment and the issues concerning environmental protection and the promotion of environmental activism.
3. exploring the potential for sustainable tourism within the region by developing the capacity and infrastructure within the local communities accepting visitors.

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

4. addressing the problem of depopulation in the mountainous communities in and around the Thethi valley by providing local educational opportunities and promoting the development of new economic activity via sustainable tourism
5. promoting awareness of ecological and environmental issues and responsibilities within the communities of this area, in particular the young people.
6. working towards exchanges in the other regions of the Balkans Peace Park, to enhance peacebuilding measures, particularly in supporting the youth of Kosovo/a, who, lacking diplomatic representation, too often miss out on international opportunities available to the youth of other nations.

### **Issues**

#### *Depopulation*

Due to the lack of educational and economic opportunities in the mountain communities, there has been, over the last 10 years a massive problem of depopulation, with inhabitants (particularly the young) leaving their home communities to search for work in the main urban centers of Tirana and Shkoder.

#### *Environmental degradation*

Although an area of outstanding beauty, this region has also suffered significant environmental damage over the last 20 years. Despite being a protected area, the lack of authority or will of government and the economic poverty of the region led to many actions that have seriously infringed upon the environment. Growth in the numbers of foreign visitors during the summer

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

months puts increased pressure on the environment and local resources, particularly due to issues of waste disposal.

### *Adult programme*

The Adult Programme focused on enabling the participants to address the needs and interests of visitors (whether from across the B3P borders, or further afield), by providing some very basic English instruction, and a chance to voice what further skills they would like to continue to develop in the future. Some of the workshops focused discussions (in Albanian) on, for example, standards in both prices and goods and services (a subject which can too often lead to misunderstanding and dispute); on environmental action. A special need in this region, where central government no longer provides the most essential needs (for example, there is no health care facility) is the possibility to cultivate the rights as well as the responsibilities of citizens, enhancing citizenship and good governance. It is a fertile valley—magnificent organic food is locally produced. Other workshops will focus on marketing local produce and crafts (e.g. wood-carved and woven goods).

We already have the very strong endorsement of the Shkodra Commune, of the head of the Shkodra Region, Dr. Gjovalin Kolombi, of the head of the Shkodra Region Education Department, and of the Shkodra Region the National Parks Dept. and of the Rector of the Luigj Gjurkuqi University of Shkodra.

*Central and Eastern European Review*

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