

REPORT

The Balkans Peace Park (B3P) Project

Development and Peacebuilding from Ground Up

by

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Margaret Mead’s quote ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,’ has never meant so much to me personally as it has been with the case of the small group of people working on the Balkans Peace Park (B3P) vision. The charity is based in the UK but has a global reach, bringing together academics, artists, environmental activists, school teachers and volunteers from around the globe to participate in their activities. Although many of them have personal or cultural connections to the Balkans, there are many more who simply want to do something positive and believe in the vision—to collaborate with and empower the local people living in the B3P region.

In 2010 I was just one of these people—a curious student on a journey to explore and discover the natural beauty and the culture of the area; to meet new people and understand the B3P project a bit better—so why not volunteer I thought. I understood quickly how odd it was for many of the locals to see a young woman travelling alone, but I could nevertheless have felt more welcome and safe. Safety was my biggest concern before setting off, but meeting another volunteer on arrival to Peja/Peć and walking through the town in the middle of the night accompanied a by a band of stray dogs was a wake-up call—sometimes we create fear unnecessarily. Life in this area is no different from life anywhere else, even when the scars of the war are still visible at times.

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Left: Tasting traditional food in Montenegro
very warm day.



Right: sitting by a waterfall in Thethi on



Another 'Peace Park'

The concept of 'peace park' is not new. The Morokulien peace park was set up between Sweden and Norway in 1914 followed by the Waterton Glacier Peace Park on the border of the USA and Canada in 1932. There are over 600 environmentally protected areas in the world which straddle international boundaries. At least 25 of these are specifically dedicated as 'peace parks'. Peace parks link nature conservation, peace-building and sustainable economic development into one whole; particular focus goes on cross-border collaboration.

The B3P was established as a charity in the UK in 2004 and its partner NGO in Albania in 2011, with other partners more loosely connected at various times. The project is largely dependent on several people and organizations collaborating with each other and taking on the principles and values embedded in a peace park rather than a prescribed programme, legislation or activity, hence the *proposed* Balkans Peace Park—it is not yet an officially recognized entity, yet this does not hinder its development and potential of contributing towards positive change.

The Balkans Peace Park is located at the intersection of 3 regions: comprising the valleys and villages of Northern Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo/a. The spectacular mountains and valleys of these regions share a landscape of uncultivated beauty, exceptional flora and fauna, as well as a traditional lifestyle that is unique in Europe and relatively unspoilt by modern development. But it is a landscape under threat: from declining population to illegal logging and other environmentally destructive behaviour. The B3P aims to unite the existing communities of the three countries in preserving biodiversity and enabling local people to continue to live in the valleys, supported by sustainable tourism, agriculture and perhaps in

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the long-term some additional innovative products and services. The important part is that through every activity nature is preserved and positive human relations nurtured.

Thethi, Albania - a brilliant place for hiking and climbing, and a lot of fun for the children learning English and environmental studies during the B3P summer school.



Some of the key activities of the B3P charity include lobbying work, collaboration, education for sustainable development and tourism, promotion of outdoor activities such as hiking and climbing. For example since 2008 the B3P runs the annual summer programs in the villages of Thethi, and more recently in Vermosh and Lepushë, where the local children, who often have limited access to education, have been given lessons in English and Environmental studies by international and local volunteers. B3P has also collaborated with the Environmentally Responsible Action (ERA) group and The Ideas Partnership (TIP) from



Kosovo/a on a summer camp held in the Rugova Valley, Kosovo/a, which brought together children from different backgrounds to promote inter-cultural understanding as well as environmental awareness.

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In 2010 an international permaculture course took place in Thethi, and an Albanian student in the UK completed his Master's degree project of a re-design of the school house in the area. The B3P is also actively seeking partnership and development opportunities in Montenegro. Every year, through these summer programmes, the B3P brings many hundreds of new visitors to the region, including significant academic projects such as the [IPPE](#), and recruits interns and volunteers from programmes such as [Peace Studies](#) at Bradford University, UK, and Rotary Peace Fellows, many of whom have served for their internships in a variety of useful positions in the region, and followed up with MA theses on their particular focus.

What do projects and ideas such as the Balkans Peace Park mean in the local and global context?

The current global economic, political and environmental turmoil highlight some crucial mistakes in the design of the systems and our thinking about what good development is. Perhaps you have heard about the [story](#) of Ladakh (a region of the Himalayas)? Globalization has local consequences and ignoring the impact of irresponsible business behaviour, unresolved social tensions and poor governance can lead to destruction of indigenous cultures as well as the environment. Whether it has been the greed of multinational corporations or simple naivety by all of us as citizens does not really matter. What matters is how we go forward and how we implement a responsible, considerate and participatory approach to development.

Pictures such as the one on the right show a sad reality of some of the unwanted side-effects of 'modern luxuries'. Unfortunately piles of waste and litter were common occurrence in the small remote village of the mountains of Albania. However, the images below show that sometimes out of necessity 'sustainability' is put into practice—this local cafe has re-used plastic bottles to build a watermill and generate electricity.



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Naturally, every intervention, whether by a foreign corporation, government or an NGO, carries an ethical dimension—the Balkans region is familiar with the unused school buildings and other ‘development aid’ that has proved to be irrelevant or gone into corrupt hands. But there are also success stories, and the Balkans Peace Park Project seems to be becoming one. Perhaps because it is not ‘aid’ but a genuine attempt to bring people together, share skills, knowledge and develop a shared vision. The B3P disproves the common misconception among the local people that every ‘foreign’ group comes with a lot of money and resources to spend. Instead the B3P asks: ‘what can you do for your own community and how could we work together?’ This might be a slower, more arduous approach to development—but hopefully a more sustainable one.

The global significance of an approach like this is echoed by Graham Watson, Member of the European Parliament for South West England and Gibraltar and a Patron of the Balkans Peace Park Project: *‘Whilst EU membership remains a beacon of hope for Balkan countries, schemes like the Balkans Peace Park Project are vitally important to peace in Europe. The Project rises above the politics that have plagued the region, and instead focuses on the issues that are common to Albanians, Kosovans and Montenegrins alike; protecting the shared natural environment and promoting a sustainable economic prosperity for all those living in the area. For me, this embodies both the spirit of liberalism and European integration, and I am therefore proud to be a Patron of the Balkans Peace Park Project.’* (MEP Graham Watson, 2010)

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In conclusion, for me the B3P provides first and foremost an opportunity to relate - between Albanians and Serbs, across the borders and within a village, between organizations, the locals and visitors from afar. Although, there are some inherent values and ideas embedded in the ‘peace park’, it nevertheless provides a space for dialogue. Sometimes this requires willingness to first ask the difficult questions of ourselves and take the step to reach out, to listen to the other, to perhaps invite them for a meal, to become vulnerable and allowing yourself to be changed and influenced by the other. And then it is about service— what can you give? Sometimes in order to understand the bigger picture and to ‘shift paradigms’, one needs to come down to level of a child and go back to the basics in order to tackle the complexities of the current problems. This is why education and learning are at the heart of the B3P activities.

