

Sustainable management of forests in Natura 2000 sites of the Smolyan region, Bulgaria

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Sustainable management of forests in Natura 2000 sites of the Smolyan region, Bulgaria

Final Report

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1 Zusammenfassung

Das Projekt „Nachhaltiges Management von Wäldern in Natura 2000 Gebieten in der Region Smolyan, Bulgarien“ wurde im Zeitraum September 2011 bis August 2013 gemeinsam von Green Balkans (Bulgarien) und EuroNatur (Deutschland) umgesetzt. Das Projekt wurde durch das Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit mit Mitteln des Beratungshilfeprogramms für den Umweltschutz in den Staaten Mittel- und Osteuropas, des Kaukasus und Zentralasiens gefördert. Die fachliche Betreuung erfolgte durch das Umweltbundesamt (UBA) sowie das Bundesamt für Naturschutz (BfN).

Das Projektgebiet, die Region Smolyan, liegt im Süden Bulgariens im zentralen Teil der Rhodopen. Die Region ist Teil des Europäischen Grünen Bandes. Wie in anderen Teilen des Grünen Bandes Europa war aufgrund der Lage an der Grenze zu Griechenland auch in den Rhodopen zu Zeiten des Eisernen Vorhangs die Nutzungsintensität sehr gering. Daher wurden hier weitestgehend naturnahe und unzerschnittene Lebensräume erhalten. Die hohe ökologische Bedeutung zeigt sich auch in einer großen Anzahl an Natura 2000 Gebieten.

Die Forstwirtschaft ist einer der bedeutendsten Industriezweige in der Region. Die Nutzung der staatlichen Wälder erfolgt auf der Grundlage von sogenannten Waldbewirtschaftungsplänen. Entsprechend der "Regulation on conditions and order for appropriate assessment of plans, programs and investment proposals related to the protected sites" ist eine Bewertung der Waldbewirtschaftungspläne hinsichtlich möglicher negativer Einflüsse auf Natura 2000 Gebiete und ihrer spezifischen Schutzziele vorgesehen. In der Praxis erfolgt eine entsprechende Prüfung jedoch zumeist nicht, da ein Großteil der Waldbewirtschaftungspläne vor dem Inkrafttreten der Verordnung erstellt, abgestimmt und genehmigt wurde. Dementsprechend ist derzeit der überwiegende Teil der Waldbewirtschaftungspläne nicht mit den Zielen und Vorgaben von Natura 2000 synchronisiert. Zudem ist das Wissen und Verständnis über Natura 2000 Management und die Bedeutung der biologischen Vielfalt im Forstsektor der Region bislang unzureichend. Daraus können sich Beeinträchtigungen des Erhaltungszustandes von Waldlebensräumen sowie einzelner Arten ergeben.

Das Projekt zielte daher darauf ab zum Erhalt und zur nachhaltigen Nutzung von Wäldern in Natura 2000 Gebieten in der Region Smolyan beizutragen. Die folgenden Projektziele wurden formuliert:

1. Das Projekt leistet einen Beitrag zur Synchronisierung der forstlichen Praxis mit den Schutzzielen von Natura 2000.
2. Das Projekt trägt zum Aufbau von Kapazitäten für das Management von Natura 2000 Gebieten auf lokaler Ebene bei.
3. Das Projekt initiiert einen konstruktiven Dialog und die Interaktion zwischen relevanten Entscheidungsträgern für das gemeinsame Management des Natura 2000 Gebietes Tsigansko gradishte.

Das Projekt umfasste Beratung, Trainings, Austausch von Best Practice Beispielen, die Entwicklung eines Modellansatzes sowie die Umsetzung praktischer Maßnahmen im

Гелände. Die Kombination verschiedener komplementärer Ansätze erwies sich als eine wertvolle Herangehensweise.

Der wichtigste Beitrag des Projektes ist der entwickelte Modellansatz zur Synchronisierung der Waldbewirtschaftungspläne mit den Schutzziele von Natura 2000. Dieser Ansatz wurde in zwei Forstbetrieben in der Region Smolyan bereits erfolgreich erprobt. Die Aktivität besitzt Pilotcharakter für Bulgarien. Der gesamte Prozess war zudem ein idealer Rahmen, um Entscheidungsträger zusammenzubringen und das Verständnis über die Bedeutung von Natura 2000 zu fördern sowie praktische Umsetzungsansätze im Forstsektor zu aufzuzeigen.

Der Erfahrungsaustausch zwischen verschiedenen Verwaltungsebenen und der Wissenstransfer über praktische Methoden zur nachhaltigen Waldbewirtschaftung wurden im Rahmen von Trainings, Workshops und einer Studienreise nach Deutschland initiiert. Hierdurch vertiefte sich das Wissen der Entscheidungsträger und Forstbeamten über verschiedene Möglichkeiten der nachhaltigen Waldbewirtschaftung mit einem Fokus auf die spezifischen Anforderungen von Natura 2000.

Darüber hinaus ermöglichte das Projekt einen Prozess zum Aufbau von Kapazitäten für das Natura 2000 Management auf lokaler Ebene. Am Beispiel des Gebietes von gemeinschaftlicher Bedeutung Tsigansko Gradishte wurde demonstriert, wie eine Bürgerinitiative verschiedener Akteure zum Management eines Natura 2000 Gebietes etabliert werden kann. Innerhalb des gesamten Prozess wurde die lokale Bevölkerung umfassend über die Natura 2000 Zielsetzungen informiert. Dies trug wesentlich zu einer verbesserten Akzeptanz und Vertrauen in Natura 2000 bei und führt langfristig zu einer aktiven Beteiligung der Bevölkerung am Natura 2000 Management.

Die wichtigsten Projektergebnisse wurden als Broschüre aufbereitet, um sie auch über das Projektgebiet hinaus nutzbar zu machen. Alle im Rahmen des Projektes entstandenen Materialien sind auf der Projektwebsite verfügbar unter http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/.

2 Резюме

Проект „Устойчиво управление на гори в Натура 2000 зони в Смолянска област, България“ беше изпълнен в периода от септември 2011 до август 2013 г., със средства от Програмата за съвети и помощ в опазването на околната среда в страните от Централна и Източна Европа, Кавказ и Централна Азия на Министерството на околната среда, Опазване на природата и Ядрената безопасност на Германия под надзора на Германската Федерална Агенция за опазване на природата (BfN) и Германската Федерална Агенция по Околна среда (UBA).

Целевата територия на този проект, област Смолян, е разположена в южна България и обхваща централните части на планината Родопи. Регионът е част от Европейския Зелен Пояс. Както и други части на Европейския Зелен Пояс, също така и в Родопите взаимодействието между човека и природата не е било много интензивно поради разположението си на границата с Гърция. По тази причина са се съхранили някои от

най-значимите природни територии на европейско и световно ниво. Високата природна стойност на района е причина и за големия брой защитени зони по Натура 2000.

В същото време горският сектор е една от основните икономически дейности в региона. Ползванията в държавните гори се уреждат с Горскостопански Планове (ГСП). В съответствие с „Наредба за условията и реда за извършване на оценка за съвместимостта на планове, програми, проекти и инвестиционни предложения с предмета и целите на опазване на защитените зони“ всички ГСП трябва да се оценяват по отношение възможните негативни въздействия върху Натура 2000 зоните и техните специфични цели. На практика обаче това не се случва, защото повечето от действащите ГСП са разработени, съгласувани и одобрени преди въпросната Наредба да влезне в сила. Ето защо повечето ГСП не са синхронизирани с целите на Натура 2000, което може да доведе до влошаване на природозащитното състояние на горските типове природни местообитания и определени видове. Освен това знанията и разбиранията за управлението на Натура 2000 и опазване на биоразнообразието в горския сектор в региона към момента не е достатъчно.

Ето защо основната цел на проекта беше да се осигури опазване и устойчиво управление на горите в зоните от Натура 2000. С цел достигане на тази цел следните подцели бяха формулирани:

1. Да допринесе за синхронизиране на горскостопанските практики с предмета и целите на опазване на Натура 2000 зоните.
2. Да допринесе за изграждане на местен капацитет за управление на зони от НАТУРА 2000.
3. Да постави начало на конструктивен диалог и взаимодействие между заинтересованите страни в посока съвместно управление на ТЗО „Циганско градище“.

Проектът включваше консултации, обучения, обмяна на добри практики и разработване на моделен подход и изпълнение на практически мерки. Тези взаимно допълващи се инструменти се оказаха изключително ценни.

Един от най-важните приноси на проекта бе разработения моделен подход за адаптиране на ГСП с природозащитните цели на Натура 2000. Подходът беше успешно тестван в две горски стопанства в Смолянски регион. Тази дейност беше пилотна за България. Целият процес беше чудесна възможност да се съберат заедно различните заинтересовани страни и да се популяризира важността на Натура 2000 и подходите за прилагането и в горския сектор.

Обмяната на опит между различни административни нива както и трансфера на знания относно устойчивите горскостопански практики, които се проведеха по време на обучителните семинари и учебното пътуване в Германия задълбочиха знанията относно възможностите за устойчиво управление на гори с акцент върху специфичните изисквания на Натура 2000.

Проектът също така спомогна за изграждането на местен капацитет по отношение управлението на Натура 2000 зони. Чрез примера със ТЗО „Циганско градище“ беше демонстрирано как гражданска структура представяща различни заинтересовани

страни може да бъде създадена с цел подкрепа управлението на Натура 2000. В рамките на този процес местното население беше информирано относно Натура 2000 и целите на мрежата. Това значително допринесе за по-високото възприемане и доверие към Натура 2000 и ще доведе до активно участие на местното население в управлението на зони от екологичната мрежа.

Всички резултати от проекта са събрани и оформени като издания с цел да бъдат достъпни до по-широк кръг заинтересовани страни включително извън Смолянска област. Всички продукти и презентации са налични на уебсайта на проекта: http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/

3 Project background and context

Since 1 January 2007, the Republic of Bulgaria is a member state of the European Union (EU). Accordingly, Bulgaria has committed itself to transpose European legislation into national law. This also refers to the establishment and the maintenance of the Natura 2000 network. The Natura 2000 network consists of sites selected under the Habitats Directive¹ (Sites of Community Interest, SCI) and sites selected for the Birds Directive² (Special Protected Areas, SPA). With the approval of the Biodiversity Act of Bulgaria in 2002 and its amendments in 2007, the Birds and the Habitats Directive were integrated into Bulgarian legislation.

Forests cover approximately one third of the country's territory and are therefore of great importance for the implementation of Natura 2000 in Bulgaria. Currently, forests are managed in accordance with the Forests Act. This law defines the terms related to ownership and management as well as to re-generation, use and protection of forests in the Republic of Bulgaria.

3.1 Forest management administration in Bulgaria

All institutions which are relevant for the management of state-owned forests in Bulgaria (named State Forestry Fund) report to the Ministry of Agriculture and Foods (see Fig. 1). The Executive Forestry Agency (EFA) and the Regional Forestry Directorates (RFD) as subordinated institutions have controlling function. Their main purpose is to implement the Forest Act, e.g. to control and prevent illegal logging and hunting and to consult projects that include activities in forests like infrastructure projects. The State Forestry Companies (SFC) as well as the State Forestry Units (SFU) and State Game Units (SGU) as their sub-units are responsible for the management of the State Forestry Fund. Altogether exist six regional SFCs. All six SFCs as well as all SFUs and SGUs are state companies registered according

¹ Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CONSLEG:1992L0043:20070101:EN:PDF>)

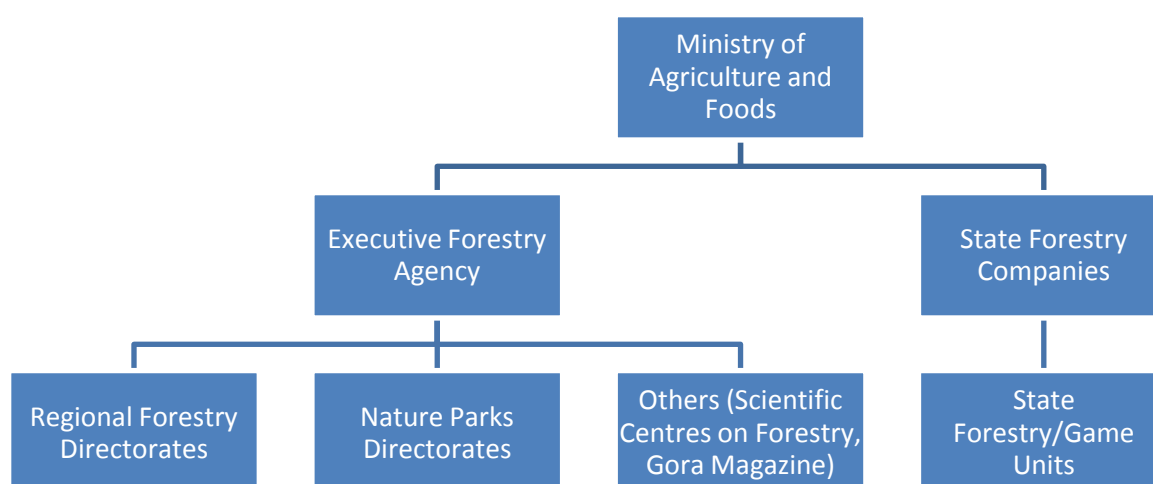
² Council Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:020:0007:0025:EN:PDF>)

to the Trades Act as commercial profit-making companies. The Nature Parks Directorates are in charge of the management of the eleven Bulgarian nature parks.

Forests which are part of the State Forestry Fund are managed and used in accordance to Forestry Management Plans (FMP) whereas the so called Forestry Management Programmes are being developed for private-owned forests and forests which are managed by cooperatives. The FMPs are valid for a ten year period of implementation. In the fifth year revisions and changes in the management can be made. For each year an annual plan is extracted from the FMP which is implemented after consultation with the responsible Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water (RIEW). The SFUs and SGUs are responsible for the implementation of the FMP. The RFDs control the correct implementation of the FMPs.

The FMPs are elaborated by private companies after public procurement procedures by the EFA. The FMP development process is supported by Forest Committees (FC). The FCs are reviewing and approving the draft FMPs. Usually the FCs consist of representatives of different authorities and stakeholders under the chair of a representative of EFA, like RFD, RIEW, municipalities, fire brigade, district administrations, etc. They have a different composition for different FMPs. All members of the FC express their opinion on the draft and in case they have requirements for changes these should be reflected in the final version. If requirements for changes are not considered an according explanation is provided. The FMPs are officially approved by the EFA after consultation with the relevant ministries and authorities which are represented in the Technical Forest Committee (Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW), fire brigade, local municipalities, etc.). The Technical Forestry Committee of EFA is an expert body that is reviewing the FMP on the basis of specific forestry issues.

Fig. 1: Organizational structure of the forest administration in Bulgaria



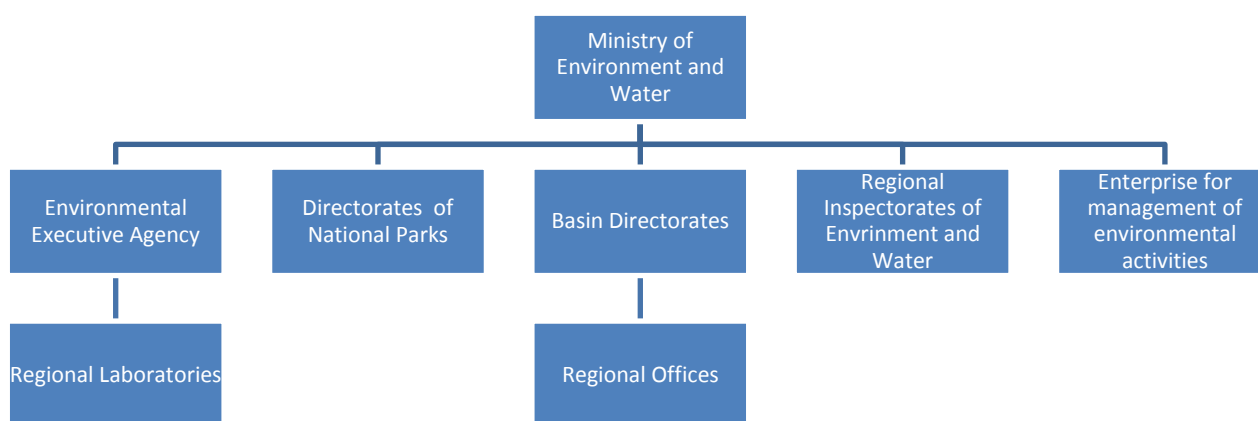
3.2 Nature conservation administration in Bulgaria

Nature conservation in Bulgaria falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW). The structure of the MOEW includes several subordinated institutions (see Fig. 2).

The sixteen Regional Inspectorates of Environment and Water (RIEW) implement and mainly control all other relevant environmental legislations within their territorial scope. The RIEW are the competent authorities for Environmental Impact Assessment and the Habitats Directive Appropriate Assessment for investment proposals. Investment proposals which concern the area of more than one RIEW fall under the competence of the MOEW.

The Basin Directorates (BD) and their regional offices have special responsibilities for the implementation of the Water Act (e.g. the Water Framework Directive of the European Union³) and control all issues related to the utilization of water. The three Directorates of National Parks (DNP) are in charge of the management of Rila National Park, Pirin National Park, and Central Balkan National Park. The Environmental Executive Agency (EEA) and its regional branches are responsible for monitoring activities. They closely cooperate with the other institutions. The Enterprise for Management of Environmental Activities (PUDOOS) is a national funding authority which finances environmental projects. Most of the projects are related to waste management but some are focusing on biodiversity. The fund is generated by taxes, fees, and penalties.

Fig. 2: Organizational structure of the nature conservation administration in Bulgaria



³ Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2000:327:0001:0072:EN:PDF>)

3.3 Implementation of Natura 2000 in forests

The implementation of Natura 2000 in Bulgaria belongs to the competences of the MOEW and its subordinated institutions. Within the MOEW the unit National Nature Protection Service Directorate is in charge of Natura 2000. The MOEW is also responsible for the Habitats Directive Appropriate Assessment according to Article 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive; the elaboration of Management Plans according to Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive; and necessary conservation measures for habitats and species. In Bulgaria the sites of the Habitats Directive have not yet received official designation orders according to the national legislation requirements so that they are currently without the legal protection of a Natura 2000 site.

The MOEW has just completed a habitats and species mapping project in Natura 2000 sites in order to achieve the requirements for the detailed mapping of habitats from Annex I and the identification of conservation status for species from Annex II according to Article 11 of the Habitats Directive. A Priority Action Framework (PAF) for Natura 2000 is under development within a project of the MOEW. This project will define priorities for the implementation of Natura 2000 in the next six years.

With regards to forest Natura 2000 sites the FMPs are the interfaces which guarantee that the forest management is in line with Natura 2000. Currently the annual forestry plans which are based on the FMP of all SFU in the country are subject to approval by the relevant RIEW. The RIEW assesses possible negative impacts and decides whether a Habitats Directive Appropriate Assessment (AA) is necessary. The AA is an assessment of the potential effects of a proposed plan, on its own or in combination with other plans or projects, on one or more Natura 2000 sites (SPA for birds, SCI for habitats and species,). AA is a requirement of Article 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive. The AA findings must be taken into account by the RIEW as competent authority. A final statement on whether or not a development plan, on its own or in combination with other plans or projects, will affect the integrity of Natura 2000 sites, is also required, prior to adoption of the plan.

The AA in Bulgaria is regulated by the „Regulation on conditions and order for appropriate assessment of plans, programs and investment proposals related to the protected sites” approved by the Government on 11 September 2007. According to the Regulation AA are undertaken for plans, programs and investment proposals that are not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the Natura 2000 site but are likely to have a significant effect thereon.

Accordingly, all FMP should be subject to AA. In practice this is not the case because most of the current FMP have been developed, consulted and approved before the above mentioned Regulation entered into force. At present FMP are not synchronized with the aims of Natura 2000 so that the FMP may actually lead to deterioration of the conservation status of forest habitats and to negative effects on certain species. Additionally, knowledge and understanding of Natura 2000 management and biodiversity conservation is currently not sufficient in the forestry sector of the region.

3.4 Project Area

The target area of the project, the Smolyan region, is situated in southern Bulgaria and encompasses the central parts of the oldest mountain range on the Balkan Peninsula – the Rhodope Mountains (Rhodopes). The region is part of the European Green Belt. The European Green Belt⁴ follows the former Iron Curtain, which separated the European continent in East and West for nearly 40 years. The border areas conserved natural habitats which served as a retreat for many endangered species so that an ecological network and living memorial landscape developed. The European Green Belt is organized into four regions; the Rhodopes belong to the southernmost region of the Balkan Green Belt.

As in other parts of the European Green Belt also in the Rhodopes the interaction between man and nature has not been intensive due to its location at the border to Greece. The region was under military surveillance until 1990 and the access was limited. Therefore some of the most significant natural areas on European and global level have been preserved. The high natural value of the area is also reflected in the high number of Natura 2000 sites. Parts of the project region fall partially within four different Natura 2000 sites: SCI Rodopi-Sredni (BG0001031) and SCI Rodopi-Zapadni (BG0001030 – the largest SCI in Bulgaria), SPA Persenk (BG0002105) and SPA Dobrostan (BG0002073). Additionally, two Natura 2000 sites are entirely situated within the region: SCI Tsigansko gradishte (BG0000372) and SPA Trigrad-Mursalitz (BG0002113) (compare Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

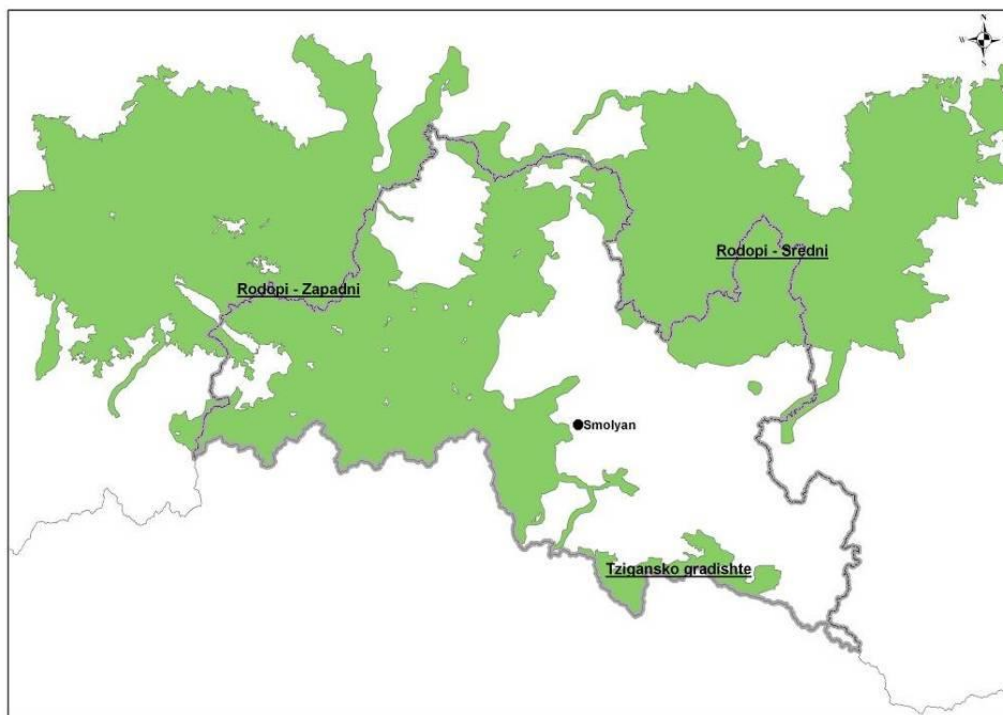


Fig. 3: Map of SCIs in the Smolyan region

⁴ More information about the European Green Belt can be found under <http://www.europeangreenbelt.org/>

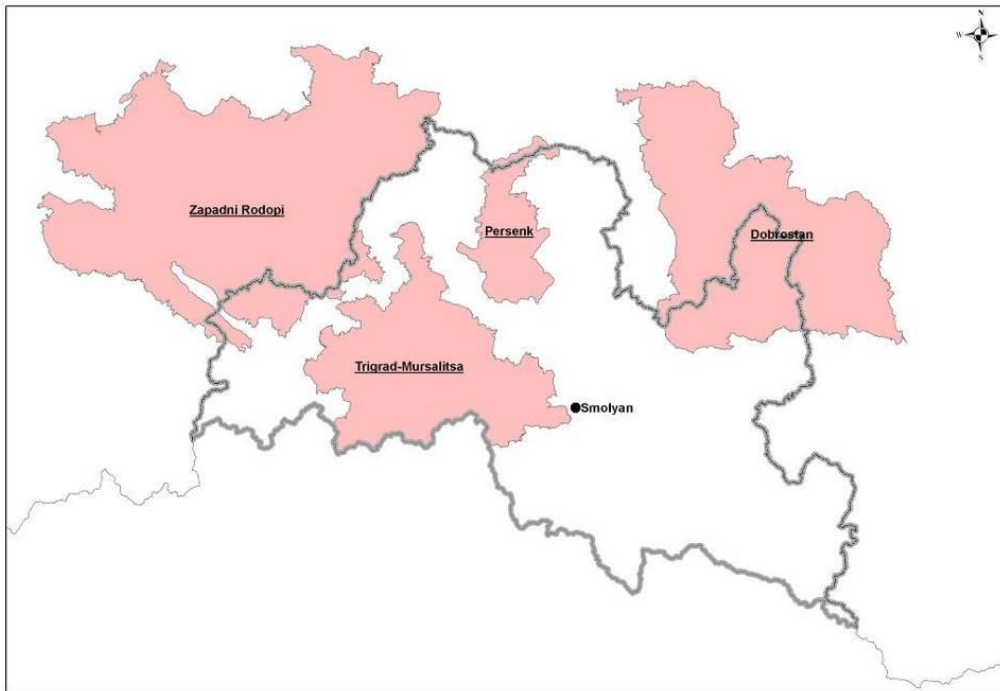


Fig 4: Map of SPAs in the Smolyan region

4 Project objectives

The main goal of the project was to enable conservation and sustainable management of forests within Natura 2000 sites in Bulgaria, with a focus on the Smolyan region. During the course of the project a model for sustainable management of forests in accordance with Natura 2000 objectives was to be developed as pilot model for other regions in Bulgaria.

In order to reach the project goal the following objectives were formulated:

1. To contribute to the synchronization of forestry practices with the conservation objectives of Natura 2000.
2. To contribute to the establishment of local capacity for the management of Natura 2000 sites.
3. To initiate a constructive dialogue and interaction among the stakeholders for the joint management of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte.

5 Project implementation and results

The activities of the project had been structured into actions. The first three actions related to the technical objectives of the project while the other two were dedicated to publicity and project management as integral parts of the project. Each action comprised several sub-actions.

5.1 Action 1: Synchronization of forestry actions planned in forestry management plans in the Smolyan region with the Natura 2000 objectives

5.1.1 Action 1.1: Meeting with representatives of EFA and MOEW

This activity aimed at the assurance of support for the project from the official governing body of forestry in Bulgaria, the EFA, as well as from the MOEW. The cooperation with MOEW and EFA was initiated already during the preparation of the project. A meeting was held to present the project idea. The support of both institutions was confirmed by letters of support.

After the start of the project a meeting was held with representatives of EFA and MOEW on 5 October 2011 in order to present the approved project and to discuss the project activities. Several proposals were given by EFA to secure close cooperation with the SFUs in the Smolyan region. Special emphasis was put on the activities of action 1 and their pilot character. Especially this action was considered as a useful model and valuable approach in combining forestry and nature protection objectives.

5.1.2 Action 1.2: Development of criteria for selecting two FMPs to be synchronized with objectives of Natura 2000

An external expert on Natura 2000 habitats and forestry was hired to support this action, Mrs. Dobromira Petrova. She is one of the leading experts on forest habitat types and co-author of the "Manual on identification of habitats of EU importance in Bulgaria". Her main task was to develop criteria for the selection of the two FMP to be synchronized with Natura 2000 objectives and to provide additional expert assistance to the project team. The selection criteria she has developed are the following:

1. The SFU to be in a process of developing a new FMP.

This criterion is considered to have the greatest weight as it addresses the main goal of the action, the synchronization of FMPs and with the conservation objectives of Natura 2000 sites. It is of utmost importance to start the process of identifying habitat types within different sub-sites of the territory of a SFU from the very start of the forestry management planning.

2. Part of the territory of the SFU to be within a Natura 2000 site with a threshold of at least 15% of the surface of the SFU to be within the Natura 2000 site.

It is not necessary that the entire area of a SFU lies within a Natura 2000 site. Forestry management measures by habitat types will be developed for all forest habitat types subject to conservation no matter whether these are within or outside of the borders of the protected zones. This aspect aims to achieve sustainable forestry management not only within a Natura 2000 site but also in the adjacent areas.

3. Different types of ownership to be present within the boundaries of the SFU.

This criterion follows the requirements by the EFA and the MOEW. Current legislation defines that inventories of forests are undertaken and funded by the state for the entire forestry unit no matter in which ownership they are. The planning of activities in non-state owned forests have to be paid by the owners following certain procedures. In most cases planning in non-state forests within Natura 2000 sites does not take into account requirements for their sustainable management. The project aimed to fill that gap and to assure consistent sustainable forestry management planning independent from ownership.

5.1.3 Action 1.3: Selection of two FMPs to be synchronized with conservation objectives of relevant Natura 2000 sites

The process started with a visit of the project area and a meeting with the Director and experts at the RFD Smolyan. The current states of FMPs in the region were discussed as well as the project goal and the approaches to be applied. Additionally a meeting with the Director of the Southern Central State Forestry Company (SCSFC) was held. At both meetings the project was highly appreciated. The approach to start the synchronization of forestry actions with Natura 2000 conservation objectives from the very start of the management planning process was considered as most appropriate in order to achieve a harmonisation of forestry management and nature conservation objectives.

Based on the developed criteria in action 1.2 a committee selected two FMPs from the Smolyan region for the synchronization process: the SFU Mihalkovo and the SGU Izvora-Devin. The committee gathered on 17 October 2011 in Sofia and consisted of Dimitar Popov (Project manager, Green Balkans), Daniela Popova-Todorva (Project coordinator, Green Balkans), Dobromira Petrova (External expert on Natura 2000 habitats and forestry) and Emil Komitov (representative of the RFD Smolyan).

Both units met all three selection criteria:

1. SFU Mihalkovo was in the process of forest inventory which is the first stage of management planning. SGU Izvora-Devin was in the process of developing the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the FMP.
2. Both units are located within the boundaries of SCI Rodopi-Zapadni (BG0001030), SGU Izvora-Devin almost entirely (more than 90% of its surface) and SFU Mihalkovo about 20%. In the latter case the approach for the adoption of sustainable forestry management in adjacent areas to Natura 2000 sites was pursued in order to achieve sustainable forestry practices also beyond the borders of the Natura 2000 site.
3. The ownership within both forestry units is diversified and comprises state, municipal, and private forests. The shares in SFU Mihalkovo are 87% state forest, 8% municipal forest, and 5% private forest. SGU Izvora-Devin comprises 96% state forest, 1% municipal forest, and 3% private forest.

5.1.4 Action 1.4: Tri-lateral meetings of the project team, representatives of SFUs and the companies developing the FMPs

After the selection of the target forestry units for the synchronization of forest management and Natura 2000, a series of tri-lateral meetings was held. The meetings aimed at the clarification of issues related to the development of the FMPs and the requirements of Natura 2000 like the identification of forest habitat types, favourable conservation status (FCS), and measures to achieve and maintain FCS. The meetings were attended by representatives of the forestry units, the external consultants of the project, and the company which was contracted to elaborate the FMPs for both forestry units, Aiko 1991 NT. It was agreed that Aiko 1991 NT undertakes the field inventories and that the data will be handed over to the external consultant who was contracted by Green Balkans (Stanislav Lazarov, Forest Art Ltd). His tasks were 1. to check if the forest habitats of Annex 1 of the Bulgarian Biodiversity Act (Annex I of the EU Habitat Directive) are correctly identified and 2. to reassess habitat types in the field and to develop recommendations for forestry activities for the different habitats and forestry area units.

An important outcome was achieved at a tri-lateral meeting in October 2011 with the forestry expert developing the ToR for SGU Izvora-Devin (forestry engineer Mr. Bogdan Bogdanov). The ToR are very important for the development of a FMP as they describe the obligatory contents of the plan. The relevant Regulation prescribes only minimum requirements for the contents. Any additional requirements for a FMP (like water protection zones, archeological sites, etc.) can be added in the ToR.

In the ToR for SGU Izvora-Devin the description of habitat types per forest compartment was included as additional requirement. The supplement was agreed to by the Technical Forestry Committee approving ToRs for FMPs at EFA on 16 December 2011.

Added value could be reached also because Bogdan Bogdanov, after completing the ToR for the SGU Izvora-Devin, included additional requirements for taxonomic descriptions and habitat codes in the ToR of other SFUs (SFU Ivaylovgrad and the SFU Topolovgrad). In this way a multiplication of the project outcomes beyond the project area was achieved. Bogdan Bogdanov is member of an informal group of experts who are involved in a large share of the forestry planning activities in Bulgaria. It was a great achievement to obtain support by him because he is heavily respected within the forest sector. If experts like him are convinced of the benefits of Natura 2000 their judgment may lead to a change in the way of thinking in the entire sector. In 2007 it was exactly the forestry sector who was giving serious opposition to the approval of the Natura 2000 network in Bulgaria by the Government. Projects like this project can have a great influence and may lead to the perception of Natura 2000 as an opportunity for sustainable forest management instead of an obstacle.

5.1.5 Action 1.5: Review of the selected FMPs and development of reports and recommendations for the integration of Natura 2000 objectives

SFU Mihalkovo

The FMP of SFU Mihalkovo was developed. The report of its synchronization with Natura 2000 objectives was an integral part of the FMP. The identification of forest habitat types

according to the Habitats Directive was undertaken based on data from field inventories according to the “Manual for identification of habitats of EU importance in Bulgaria”⁵.

The report on the synchronization of the FMP with Natura 2000 objectives contains the following information and recommendations:

- General information on Natura 2000 sites within the SFU (SCI Rodopi-Zapadni, SPA Persenk, SPA Trigrad-Mursalitsa).
- For each of the identified forest habitat types the FCS was defined based on different indicators as follows:
 - 91CA Rhodopide and Balkan range Scots pine forests – in FCS;
 - 9410 Acidophilous *Picea* forests of the montane to alpine levels (*Vaccino-Piceetea*) - in FCS;
 - *9530 (Sub)Mediterranean pine forests with endemic black pines - 42.66 Palla's pine forests – in unfavourable conservation status based on the indicators canopy cover and age structure;
 - 91BA Moesian silver fir forests - in FCS;
 - 9130 Asperulo-Fagetum beech forests – in unfavourable conservation status based on the indicator age structure;
 - 9170 Galio-Carpinetum oak hornbeam forests – in unfavourable conservation status based on the indicator age structure.
- For each of the identified forest habitat type specific measures are planned for each forestry compartment and sub-compartment.
- Old growth forests are designated for each habitat type at a certain size – from 10% to 23% of each habitat type. Only for the habitat *9530 (Sub) Mediterranean pine forests with endemic black pines (42.66 Palla's pine forests) it is 100% because of the unfavourable conservation status and due to the fact that the area of this habitat covers only 7,2 ha.

The official review of the FMP of SFU Mihalkovo was completed. The prescriptions and recommendations of the external expert were presented on the second meeting of the responsible FC in August 2012. Main issues were related to recommendations on different types of cuttings, especially for the broad-leaved forests (beech and oak), in order to create a more natural structure of the forests: diversity in density, age, coverage, etc. The proposals were supported and included in the FMP. The amended FMP was reviewed by the Technical Forestry Committee of EFA and approved officially.

⁵ Kavrakova, V., Dimova, D., Dimitrov, M., Tsonev, R., Belev, T., Rakovska, K. (eds.) (2009): Manual for the identification of habitats of EU importance in Bulgaria (in Bulgarian). Sofia, WWF and Green Balkans. (http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/manual_habitats_natura2000_bg2008.pdf)

SGU Izvora-Devin

The process at SGU Izvora-Devin started later than in SFU Mihalkovo. The first meeting of the FC was held in June 2012. Field inventories of different forest plots were completed by October 2012. Afterwards data from the inventories were provided in electronic tables to the external expert. The draft FMP was developed and the report on its synchronization with Natura 2000 objectives was annexed to the plan.

The report on the synchronization of the FMP with Natura 2000 objectives contains the following information and recommendations:

- General information on Natura 2000 sites within the SGU (SCI Rodopi-Zapadni and SPA Zapadni Rodopi).
- For each of the identified forest habitat types the favourable conservation status was defined based on different indicators as follows:
 - 91CA Rhodopide and Balkan range Scots pine forests – in FCS;
 - 9410 Acidophilous *Picea* forests of the montane to alpine levels (*Vaccino-Piceetea*) - in FCS;
 - *9530 (Sub) Mediterranean pine forests with endemic black pines - 42.66 Palla's pine forests – in FCS;
 - 91BA Moesian silver fir forests - in FCS;
 - 9130 Asperulo-Fagetum beech forests – in FCS;
 - 9170 Galio-Carpinetum oak hornbeam forests – in unfavourable conservation status based on the indicator age structure.
- For each forest habitat type specific measures are planned for each forestry compartment and sub-compartment.
- Old growth forests are designated for each habitat type at a certain size – from 10% to 37 % of each habitat type.

Compared to SFU Mihalkovo the status of forest habitat types in SGU Izvora-Devin is better, only one of the habitats is in unfavourable status. There are several reasons for this but most important is the general difference between the units. SFU Mihalkovo is a forestry unit and timber and firewood production are the main activities pursued there while in SGU Izvora-Devin hunting is the primary management goal. Thus certain areas are kept intact to assure a sanctuary for the game species (e.g. chamois, deer).

The review of the FMP of SGU Izvora-Devin is currently under way. As the process at SGU Izvora-Devin started later due to the public procurement procedure also the official review process is delayed and could not be completed in the course of the project. The second meeting of the responsible FC is scheduled for September 2013. The proposed measure for keeping 9170 Galio-Carpinetum oak hornbeam forests without cuttings is discussed with the company developing the FMP and the Director of the SGU. It is expected to be approved on the meeting of the FC. 37% of that habitat type is designated as old growth forest in order to improve the indicator age structure.

5.1.6 Action 1.6: Presentation of the developed reports and recommendations

The reports and recommendations which have been developed in Activity 1.5 were presented to interested parties. The report on the synchronization of the FMP for the SFU Mihalkovo with Natura 2000 requirements has been presented at the second meeting of the FC of SFU Mihalkovo on 21-22 August 2012. At this meeting the draft of the FMP was presented in its two parts – forestry and hunting. Statements by interested parties were made – positive or requirements for small changes in basic facts. The external expert (Dr. Stanislav Lazarov, Forest Art Ltd.) presented the approach followed and explained what it aims at from the perspective of the foresters' point of view, e.g. what type of cuttings are acceptable for different forest habitats, retention of old growth forest island, etc. Through this the model approach which was developed in the course of the project was presented and distributed to a wider audience.

At national level a workgroup on amendments in forestry legislation and development of National Forestry Strategic Plan (NFSP) was created in which also a non-governmental organisation (NGO) is represented: WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme Bulgaria. A meeting was held with the representative WWF, Mrs. Neli Doncheva, on 17 January 2013. The project goal, its objectives and the results were presented. Special emphasis was put on the project outcomes. It was proposed to include the developed and tested methodology of action 1 as well as the concept on dead wood (outcome of action 2) in the new national regulation on the development of FMPs. The participation of an NGO representative in the workgroup was a valuable possibility to distribute the project results and to promote the concept of sustainable forestry within the forestry sector.

5.2 Action 2: Development of local capacity for sustainable forest management in Natura 2000 sites

5.2.1 Action 2.1: Regional workshop on methods and ways of sustainable forest management in Natura 2000 sites

This workshop was a two-day event held on 5-6 November 2012. Topics addressed were separated into three modules: dead wood, forest management in Natura 2000 sites and certification according to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Dr. Axel Ssymank of BfN as scientific supervisor of the project attended the seminar and contributed his experience. Each of the modules included input from Bulgaria, Germany and Greece. Speakers in the seminar were: Dr. Stanislav Lazarov and Dobromira Dimova (Bulgaria, external experts of the project), Boris Mittermeier (Germany, Bavarian Forest Administration), Dr. Nick Grigoriadis (Greece, Forest Research Institute) and Peri Kourakli (Greece, BirdLife). The seminar was attended by more than 30 persons: experts from SFU Devin, SFU Krumovgrad, SGU Izvora-Devin, SFU Slaveyno, SFU Mihalkovo, SFU Dospat, SFU Borino, SFU Hvoyna, SCSFC, RFD Smolyan, SFU Zlatograd, SFU Kirkovo, SFU Beglika, SFU Shiroka polyana, SFU Trigrad, SFU Smilyan, SFU Smolyan, SFU Selishte, SFU Chehlyovo, SFU Ardino, WWF-DCP, Chepelare Municipality, Madan Municipality.

In the module on Natura 2000 a comprehensive description of all forest habitat types listed in Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive was given and guidelines on FCS were presented. Also the model approach for the synchronization of FMPs with Natura 2000 objectives was

presented. Special emphasis was put on the module dealing with dead wood in forests. In Bulgaria this topic was traditionally neglected and considered as a threat. The manual “Inventory and management of dead wood in forest ecosystems” which was developed in the course of this project was presented. The electronic version is available for download from the project website (http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/Metodi-za-ustoychivo-upravlenie-na-gorite/file.indexdetails.file/menu_id.109/lang.2/).

On the second day a field visit to a forestry cooperative was made where the dead wood concept was already put into practice. Explanations were given on the positive role the dead wood plays in the forest ecosystem by Dr. Stanislav Lazarov and other experts. Also the Director of SFU Trigrad (Zaharina Baklarova) shared her experience gained in the past four years since dead wood is retained and not extracted from SFU Trigrad. Experts from SFUs who were involved in the process of FSC certification (where dead wood retention is compulsory) also confirmed that retention of dead wood is not a threat. The workshop has helped to outline the importance of dead wood in the forest ecosystem and to consider it as part of the natural process creating healthier forests instead of seeing it as a threat. Through this exchange the foresters were more open towards the dead wood concept.

All presentations and materials from the workshop were published on the project website (http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/Methods-for-sustainable-forest-management/file.indexdetails.file/menu_id.109/).

5.2.2 Action 2.2: Training of foresters on the development of projects and the use of existing mechanisms to finance sustainable forest management

This training was held on 16 May 2012. Experts from Bulgaria, Greece and Germany presented different options for funding with a special focus on LIFE+ projects. The focus on LIFE+ was chosen because SFUs in Bulgaria are ineligible for most of the other funding schemes (like Operative Programs Environment, Competition, INTERREG, etc.). The German expert Dr. Reinhold Schaal represented the Ministry of Rural Affairs and Consumer Protection of Baden-Württemberg. Greek experts were Dr. Nick Grigoriadis (Forest Research Institute) and Stavros Kehagioglou (Drama Forest Service). Bulgarian experts were Toma Belev (former director of Vitosha Nature Park) and Mrs. Valentina Fidanova (Sterna Consult Ltd).

The topics presented by national speakers addressed issues like additional financial benefits from forests based on the ecosystem services they provide and options for funding by different measures of the Rural Development Program of Bulgaria (co-funded by EAFRD). Dr. Schaal presented the concept of forest use types which is being applied in Baden-Württemberg in order to reflect the different demands of society and the multifunctionality of forests. The main focus of his presentation was on experiences and best practices with LIFE and LIFE+ projects in the forest sector in Baden-Württemberg. Dr. Grigoriadis and Mr. Kehagioglou focused on a comparative study of a natural unmanaged forest (Frakto) and an intensively managed forest (Elatia). The training was attended by 22 persons: SFU Dospat, SFU Smilyan, SFU Smolyan, SFU Zlatograd, SGU Izvora-Devin, SFU Slaveyno, SFU Borino, SCSFC, private forestry cooperative Karagazovo, private forestry cooperative Aidaritsa-Mandrite, and the NGO Alternative farming union in the Rhodopes.

The topics presented at the training were highly appreciated by the participants. The presented experience from Germany on LIFE+ projects was considered very useful, because LIFE+ is considered an important opportunity for funding for the SFUs from the region. Representatives from different SFUs also highly appreciated the presented options within the Rural Development Program of Bulgaria.

5.2.3 Action 2.3: Study tour to Germany presenting experiences in sustainable forestry in Natura 2000 sites

The study tour to Germany took place from 24-28 September 2012. The six participants of the study tour represented institutions which have been actively involved throughout the project: the RFD Smolyan, the SCSFC, the SFU Trigrad, the SFU Smilyan, and the SFU Mihalkovo. Two representatives of Green Balkans and one EuroNatur representative took part in the study tour too.

Main aim of the visit to Germany was to present sustainable forest management practices in Natura 2000 sites. The study tour should also open a space for reflection, exchange of experiences and discussions. In order to offer experiences which are transferable to the project area in the Rhodopes, the Black Forest was chosen for the study visit.

The program included scientific aspects, best practice examples in the field, and it also covered topics like regional development. Different organizations were visited, including the Forest Research Center Baden-Württemberg and several forest districts. The group also visited the information center “House of Nature” of Nature Park Südschwarzwald.

After the study tour the participants gave a very positive feedback. Most interesting for them was the integrative approach which is being implemented in Germany. The participants were impressed by the motivation of foresters to support nature conservation and to include respective strategies into their management practices. They also were enthusiastic about the cooperation between the forestry sector and nature conservation organizations as well as about the involvement of the public. The dead wood concept which was presented during the tour was also very valuable for the participants and ideas were discussed on how to transfer this approach into practice in the Rhodopes. But also the approach of forest pedagogy and the visit to the information center “House of Nature” were very inspiring for the group. This seemed to be an innovative idea for most of the participants and they considered it to be a very promising concept in order to raise awareness about the value of forests as well as the role of forest management. However, some aspects seemed to be striking for the participants – most of them considered the utilization of German forests to be rather intense. Additionally, the handling of hunting and of large carnivores in Germany was different from the Rhodopes.

5.2.4 Action 2.4: Introduction to the marking of biotope trees

This action was developed during the process of project implementation together with the SCSFC and the RFD Smolyan. The need for the marking of biotope (wildlife, habitat) trees⁶ was raised during the course of the project by the involved institutions and experts. It was decided that it will be beneficial if an additional pilot action is implemented.

The activities were aiming at improving the knowledge of foresters in the region about the functions of biotope trees and to develop and introduce a procedure to mark the trees in the field. The decision to develop a special mark was mainly based on the consideration that to mark the biotope trees with a woodpecker stands for a more complex approach to forestry which is not only based on economic goals but rather on a combination of the different functions of forests. It will also contribute to a positive image of forestry especially in an area like the Rhodopes, where hiking is a traditional form of tourism. The woodpecker was selected as it is easily accepted as ally by the foresters because it is feeding on insects that cause damages to trees.

It was agreed with SCSFC and RFD Smolyan to introduce the marking procedure to selected SFUs as a pilot activity in 2013. Twelve SFUs from four different regions within the scope of the SCSFC participated in the pilot activity: Dospat, Trigrad, Smolyan, Smilyan, Shiroka laka (Smolyan region), Asenovgrad and Karlovo (Plovdiv region), Ardino and Kirkovo (Kardzhali region), and Rakitovo, Rodopi and Shiroka polyana (Pazardzhik region). The focus was put on units that are FSC-certified or in the process of FSC-certification as the marking of habitat trees is considered as added value for the certification process.

The following activities were implemented within this action: elaboration of a booklet on the identification of biotope trees, two trainings in biotope tree identification and marking, and provision of marks with the silhouette of a woodpecker. The target group of the workshops was experts who are involved in the general marking of trees. They will integrate the marking of biotope trees into their conventional marking activities in the summer months (June until August 2013).

During the process the SCSFC has demonstrated openness and commitment to further develop the identification and marking procedure and to possibly introduce it officially for all the forests which it is managing. The fine-tuning of the procedure will be undertaken on the basis of the practical experiences gained in the first year.

The paper version of the booklet about the identification of biotope trees was distributed among all SFUs in the Smolyan region and most of the SFUs under the responsibility of the SCSFC and published online (http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/Metodi-za-ustoychivo-upravlenie-na-gorite/file.indexdetails.file/menu_id.109/lang.2/).

⁶ It was decided to use the term “biotope tree” as it was considered to be most appropriate due to the following reasons: the term habitat tree is not officially accepted in Bulgarian and the other term “wildlife trees” can hardly be translated into Bulgarian. Biotope on the other hand is a widely used term in Bulgarian which is easy to understand especially by foresters.

5.3 Action 3: Establishment of a civic group for the management of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte

5.3.1 Action 3.1: Analysis of local stakeholders and development of a detailed list with their contact details and representatives

The area of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte lies in the territory of the Municipalities Rudozem, Madan, Smolyan and Zlatograd. As most of the area is forested the SFUs Zlatograd and Smilyan are very important stakeholders. Settlements in the area are few and mostly very small villages. Next to forestry mining is the most important branch of economic activity. According to the Standard Data Form (SDF)⁷ the following institutions are relevant for the SCI Tsigansko gradishte:

- RIEW Smolyan
- BD for Eastern Aegean Region based in Plovdiv
- Smolyan Municipality
- Rudozem Municipality
- Madan Municipality
- Zlatograd Municipality
- Smolyan District Administration
- RFD Smolyan
- SFU Zlatograd
- SFU Smilyan
- SCSFC

A detailed analysis of the stakeholders was developed. It turned out that some stakeholders which were important for the process and contributed substantially to it were not listed in the SDF of the site. During the project implementation and on the basis of individual and joint meetings the following additional stakeholders were identified: Rudozem Tourism Council NGO, Rudmetal company, Border Police Smolyan, Regional History Museum, Zlatograd Ethnographic Complex, Regional Development Center NGO Zlatograd.

The stakeholder analysis is available on the project website: http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/Zashtitena-zona-Tsigansko-gradishte-/file.indexdetails.file/menu_id.136/lang.2/.

5.3.2 Action 3.2: Individual meetings with local stakeholders

During the project more than 30 individual meetings with local stakeholders were held. The individual meetings were an important part of the process to establish a civic group. The

⁷ The Standard Data Form (SDF) was developed to provide harmonized site specific information form for both SCIs and SPAs. It requires details of the site code (name, size, etc.), the site location and a brief description including its importance, vulnerability, protection status, and management and conservation objectives. Apart from mandatory information, optional details may also be given. A key component of the information provided about the site involves the details of the occurring bird species respectively specific details about habitat types and occurring species according to the Habitats Directive.

individual meetings allowed a detailed introduction of Natura 2000 to many stakeholders in order to clarify different aspects, like the general aims of Natura 2000, its challenges, opportunities, limitations, etc. Individual meetings also allowed for an easier and more open communication with the stakeholders as often larger groups cause inconvenience for open expression of concerns and opinions. Most important positive aspects of a civic group for the management of SCI Tsigansko gradishte were the opportunities that the Natura 2000 site offers, e.g. the potential to provide for the development of eco-tourism.

The facilitator who was contracted for the process (Mr. Stoyan Yotov from the NGO Borrowed Nature) participated actively in all joint meetings and most of the individual ones in order to explain why the participation of local stakeholders is of utmost importance for the successful implementation of Natura 2000. His extensive knowledge on the topic and his communication skills were a great benefit for the successful completion of the process.

5.3.3 Action 3.3: Executing the process of establishing a civic group for the management of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte

Joint meetings

The process included a series of three joint meetings of the previously identified stakeholders. During each meeting different aspects of Natura 2000 and specifically of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte were addressed. The territorial range was also reflected in the fact that the three joint meetings took place in the three main municipal centres Madan, Rudozem and Zlatograd. Thus a spirit of equality within the region was fostered. Mr. Stoyan Yotov as facilitator of the process participated actively in the preparation of the agenda and in the discussions during the meetings.

The first joint meeting of stakeholders was held on 26 April 2012 in the town of Rudozem. It was hosted by the Rudozem Municipality and opened officially by the Mayor of Rudozem (Mr. Rumen Pehlivanov). The meeting was attended by representatives of NGOs from Rudozem, the Madan Municipality, the SFUs Zlatograd and Smilyan, the Smolyan District Administration, the Zlatograd Municipality, NGOs from Zlatograd, the Hunters Union, etc. As it was a first joint meeting more general issues related to Natura 2000 have been raised in order to inform the participants. The topics presented included

- overall presentation of the project,
- funding organization,
- Natura 2000 in general,
- reasons for the selection of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte,
- European Green Belt Initiative,
- link to national protected areas,
- potential for participation of different regional stakeholders in the planning and management of the site.

The second joint meeting was held on 4 July 2012 in the Madan Municipality. The focus of the meeting was on different aspects related directly to the SCI Tsigansko gradishte itself, like the specific challenges of the site, activities for protection, and the formation of partnerships between different stakeholders. Discussions took place in small groups with facilitators and the summarized results were presented by each group. In the wrap-up

session the outputs from all groups were synthesized. The participants in the meeting were almost the same persons who participated in the first meeting so that a high level of continuity was assured during the process.

In the third joint meeting held in Zlatograd on 17 October 2012 participated an expert from Germany to share his practical experience in the management of a Natura 2000 site by a civic group. With Mr. Carsten Burggraf from the “Local Action Schwartau-Schwentine” in the German federal state Schleswig-Holstein in Northern Germany a suitable and responsive expert was found. Before the meeting was held several individual meetings were organised with different local stakeholders involved in the process so that Carsten Burggraf could get a more comprehensive impression of the situation in the region. Based on these exchanges Mr. Burggraf could tailor his contribution and recommendations to the actual circumstances in the region.

The approach of the Local Action Schwartau-Schwentine which was presented by Mr. Burggraf is bottom-up and involves a wide participation of different stakeholders. Despite geographic differences the approach was similar to the process that was initiated in the project. One main difference was the support of the competent authority (Ministry of Environment) to actively involve local stakeholders into the management planning and to establish Local Actions for this purpose. The main recommendation for the local stakeholders of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte was to develop an alliance as wide as possible in order to secure support for the initiative.

The official structure of the civic group was the second main topic discussed during the third meeting. It was presented by the legal adviser (Mr. Ventsislav Enev). The legal adviser had the task to review different organisational forms for the establishment of a civic group. During the process it was decided that the civic group to be established shall be an officially registered NGO. The stakeholders opted for an NGO as it is an official body that can unite interests of different stakeholders and represent these officially during the process of management planning. The legal adviser carried out the necessary legal steps for the registration of the NGO. Additionally, facilitator Mr. Yotov presented possible funding opportunities for the NGO.

Establishment of the NGO “Initiativa Tsigansko gradishte”

The process was completed with the establishment of the NGO “Initiativa Tsigansko gradishte”. The founding meeting was held in Rudozem on 30 November 2012. The new NGO was officially registered by the Smolyan Regional Court with Resolution No 4/7.02.2013. Founding members were ten persons representing different institutions: NGOs dealing with nature protection, youth initiatives, local traditions and tourism; mining and tourism businesses; municipal councillors. A management board was selected including one person from Zlatograd (Mrs. Liliana Andreeva, journalist) and two persons from Rudozem (Mr. Iliya Yochev, Rudmetal Company and Brahim Chernarev, municipal councillor and chairman of the Rudozem Tourism Council NGO). Brahim Chernarev was elected as chairman of the NGO “Initiativa Tsigansko gradishte”.

Main goals of the NGO are the restoration and protection of nature, environment and sustainable development at national and international level; environmental awareness and environmental education; supporting national, public, scientific, economic and other

institutions, organizations and citizens in their work for the conservation of species and habitats. The goals have been formulated more generally so that the NGO will have a broader perspective. This will also guarantee more flexibility for funding opportunities. Nevertheless, the objectives directly relate to Natura 2000. The means to achieve the objectives include the development and implementation of projects, campaigns on public awareness, development of a management plan for the SCI Tsigansko gradishte, participation in field surveys and planning and implementation of measures for rare species.

5.4 Action 4: Project publicity

The promotion of the project started from the very beginning and was continued during the complete project duration. To support the distribution of information a data base with contact details of interested parties was developed. A detailed project outline was circulated to all interested parties to inform about the project and the different steps of its implementation. Thus a high level of transparency about the project and its objectives was guaranteed.

The kick-off workshop for the project was held on 4 November 2011 in Smolyan. In total 25 participants attended the event. Among them were representatives of SFUs, municipal and regional authorities, the RIEW, NGOs, etc. The agenda included a detailed presentation of the project activities and the progress achieved so far. The participants were informed about the project partners' roles and overall activities. As the project area is part of the Balkan Green Belt special attention was put on the European Green Belt Initiative. To get information about the stakeholders' expectations, needs and opinion about topics addressed by the project (sustainable forestry, joint management of Natura 2000 sites, capacity needs, etc.) a special feedback form was handed to all participants. The data from the collected feedback forms showed a very positive evaluation from the participants. Main expectations mentioned were the provision of information on the development of the project activities and interest in the German experiences in integrating Natura 2000 and forestry.

In order to regularly inform about the project's progress a project website was developed where regular updates on project actions were made and large sources of information were uploaded. The website is part of the main website of Green Balkans. Different sections provide information on the project activities. Materials from trainings and workshops are also uploaded. Useful information on the SCI Tsigansko gradishte like a map, SDF and conservation objectives is available for all stakeholders.

http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/file.index.file/lang.2/.

The events of the project were covered by local media. The last joint meeting of the process to establish a civic group for the management of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte held at Zlatograd was covered by a local TV station.

In the periods 28 March until 1 April 2012 and 20 to 24 March 2013 Green Balkans took part in the exhibition "Nature, Hunting and Fishing" at the International Fair Plovdiv and presented there this project.

The final workshop was held on 22 April 2013 in Smolyan. The workshop's main purpose was to present all project outputs from the different actions. The project background was explained by the project manager Dimitar Popov. He also presented the project structure and its objectives. The external expert Dr. Stanislav Lazarov presented the results from the

synchronization of the FMPs of the SFU Mihalkovo and the SGU Izvora-Devin (action 1) and from the pilot activities on the marking of biotope trees (action 2.4). Mr. Stoyan Yotov presented the process at the SCI Tsigansko gradishte (action 3). An update on the development of the European Green Belt Initiative was given by Anne Katrin Heinrichs of EuroNatur. The workshop closed with a session dedicated to feedback and future needs. The participants expressed willingness to develop a LIFE+ project inspired by the study visit to Germany and by the training on funding opportunities for sustainable forest management.

In the course of the project three different brochures were developed and printed. All brochures are available in Bulgarian language. One is dedicated to the inventory of deadwood, another one to the identification and marking of biotope trees and the third one compiles the project outcomes in a project brochure.

The project brochures were distributed to different interested parties at the final workshop as well as during the participation in other events, e.g. the workshop of Parks in Bulgaria, a workshop of the MOEW on the development of a Priority Action Framework on Natura 2000.

5.5 Action 5: Project management

The project was jointly implemented by EuroNatur (Germany) and Green Balkans (Bulgaria). The project team of the NGO Green Balkans consisted of three persons: Dimitar Popov (Project manager), Daniela Popova-Todorova (Project coordinator), and Neli Arabadzhieva (Technical assistant). Additionally several external experts were contracted: Dobromira Petrova and Dr. Stanislav Lazarov (Forest Art Ltd) for action 1 and Mr. Stoyan Yotov from the NGO Borrowed Nature for action 3. Regular conferences and meetings for the planning and preparation of project actions were held by the Bulgarian project team. Different actions of the project were addressed and tasks were distributed among the team. EuroNatur was responsible for the overall project and financial management (e.g. preparation of activity and financial reports). EuroNatur also guaranteed a regular exchange with the scientific supervisor at BfN and the project coordinator at UBA. Additionally, EuroNatur was responsible for the implementation of action 2 (e.g. organisation of study tour, input of conceptual considerations for workshop programmes, contact to experts from Germany and Greece).

6 Evaluation of the project and its results by the target groups

The project addressed the following target groups:

- employees of the RFD Smolyan,
- foresters from the SFUs and SGUs in the Smolyan region,
- representatives of the EFA,
- representatives of the SCSFC,
- private forest owners,
- companies developing forestry management plans for the SFUs in the Smolyan region,
- experts of the RIEW Smolyan,

- representatives of municipal administrations in the Smolyan region,
- local businesses,
- representatives of local NGOs and civil society.

Representatives of all target groups have been involved in the various project activities. A high level of continuity was guaranteed as most of the involved stakeholders attended several of the offered workshops under action 2 and were also actively involved in the processes of action 1 and action 3.

During all project events (kick-off meeting, joint meetings in action 3.3., training seminars in action 2) feedback forms have been filled out by the participants. The overall evaluation of the project activities by the target groups was very positive.

The results from action 1 were highly valued by the forestry experts from both SFU Mihalkovo and SFU Izvora-Devin. Very good dialogue and collaboration was achieved with the company developing the two FMPs. The professionals from the company were very supportive during the review of the FMP and when reflecting upon the proposed amendments by the external expert that was hired in the context of the project. The results from the synchronization process were appreciated and supported also by the EFA.

The trainings which were organised and provided in action 2 received a strong response by the foresters in the region, both state and private. The workshop on sustainable forestry practices in Natura 2000 sites was evaluated by the participating forest experts as very useful. The Bulgarian experts are highly respected by the forest sector and most of the participants have worked with them in the past. It was positive that they could be contracted for the project. The Bulgarian foresters also considered the chance to get to know more about the activities of their colleagues from Germany and Greece as very valuable. The most important output from the workshop was considered to be the impulse to reconsider the perception of dead wood and the requirements of Natura 2000 in forests. Many of the participants were highly interested in the topic of FSC-certification as currently the number of certified units in Bulgaria is very low. This is seen as a serious setback for the sector because it limits its competitiveness with other countries like Romania where FSC-certification is widely used.

Also the study visit to Germany was much appreciated by foresters from the Smolyan region. The missing of forest pedagogic was identified as a great deficiency in the Bulgarian forest sector. This field of work should be addressed in the future as it will be of great importance for the implementation of Natura 2000 in forests, especially in regions where forestry is playing a major role in the economy like in the Rhodopes.

The pilot activity on the identification and marking of habitat trees was evaluated by the scientific community as a very important step towards the assurance of long-term biodiversity conservation in forests. The common opinion was that this initiative should be made official at national level and many of the experts working in other regions envied the participating SFUs as being selected for the introduction of such a positive initiative. If the promotion of this activity will prove to be successful it will be included into the regulations on national level.

The process implemented as part of action 3 met a positive response from the involved stakeholders and the established NGO shows the successful conduction of the process.

Especially the support provided by the Municipality of Rudozem and by the Rudmetal Company was a great achievement. It reflects that the awareness on the importance of Natura 2000 was strengthened and that relevant stakeholders have been convinced about its relevance.

The RFD Smolyan described the project as an important “international experience and collaboration with NGOs” in an article presenting the institution in the GORA magazine.

7 Evaluation of the project and its results by the implementing organisations

The project included consultation, trainings, exchange of best practices, the development of a model approach and the implementation of practical measures on the ground. This complementary set of instruments turned out to be very valuable.

All of the intended actions have been completed including the defined milestones for each sub-action. It was even possible to develop and successfully close an additional action. It was very positive that the project team could directly react on the identified demand and provide consultancy with regards to the identification and marking of habitat trees within the course of the project.

Very positive is also the fact that the actions implemented in this project have model character for other regions. Through the high commitment of the project partners and the involved experts, positive examples have been developed which already have an influence beyond the initial project area.

As the project area is located at the European Green Belt the project results are also an important contribution to the conservation and sustainable use of the European Green Belt.

7.1 Detailed reflection of project results

7.1.1 Action 1: Synchronization of forestry actions planned in forestry management plans in the Smolyan region with the Natura 2000 objectives

In the course of the project FMPs were developed for the SFU Mihalkovo and the SGU Izvora-Devin which integrate the conservation objectives of Natura 2000. With this a model approach was developed which is transferable to other regions in Bulgaria. Through the continuous promotion of the project and the close cooperation and coordination with various institutions on different levels the outcomes of the project were successfully distributed.

The development of a model for the synchronization of FMPs and Natura 2000 objectives was an ideal frame to bring together different stakeholders and to improve the cooperation among them. It was also a chance to raise awareness about the importance of Natura 2000 and approaches for its implementation in the forestry sector.

The whole process in this action was very positive. This is also due to the experts who were involved in the activities and the high acceptance of all implemented activities by the company which developed both FMPs. The support which was provided by RFD Smolyan and the different SFUs and SGUs during joint meetings and throughout the whole process

was also an important factor for the successful completion of this action. The proposal to include the developed approach into the official legislation on FMP development is a great achievement. If the proposal is approved it will be a great step forward towards the long-term conservation of Natura 2000 forests in Bulgaria.

7.1.2 Action 2: Development of local capacity for sustainable forest management in Natura 2000 sites

The exchange of experiences between different administrative levels as well as the input of Greek and German experts which was initiated by workshops, trainings and the study tour to Germany deepened the knowledge about possibilities to sustainably manage forests with a focus on the specific requirements of Natura 2000. It was a valuable occasion to broaden the view and get to know different approaches for all involved persons, including the experts from Greece and Germany who had the chance to contribute to the project.

The two regional workshops on sustainable forestry in Natura 2000 sites and on funding opportunities have been successfully implemented. Both workshops were supported by forest experts from Germany and Greece and allowed for a valuable transfer of best practices as well as for the exchange of experiences.

Also the study tour to Germany was a success. The participants from the Smolyan region were highly motivated and through their involvement in the whole process a high level of continuity was secured. The study tour involved visits to different institutions reflecting theoretical and scientific as well as practical approaches and experiences with the management of forests in Natura 2000 sites. The exchange of experiences was valuable for the participants of the study tours as well as for the representatives of German institutions.

The manual on dead wood which has been developed as supporting document in this action was highly appreciated by practitioners as well as by the scientific community (e.g. the Institute of Forest, Forestry University Sofia).

Additionally, a pilot activity on the marking of biotope trees was implemented. This additional activity can be considered as very successful as it led to the practical implementation on the ground and produced tangible results. Most striking is the fact that this activity is put into practice not only in the Smolyan region itself but in a wider scope. With the brochure on the identification of biotope trees an important resource has been developed which will be very valuable also after the project's closure.

7.1.3 Action 3: Establishment of a civic group for the management of the SCI Tsigansko gradishte

The NGO "Initiativa Tsigansko gradishte" was officially established in November 2012. The process for its establishment was very successful. The local population was informed about Natura 2000 and its objectives. This substantially contributed to clearing up misunderstandings and to create more acceptance and trust towards Natura 2000. The people who were actively involved in the process have now a better understanding about their possibilities to contribute to the management of the Natura 2000 site. The project contributed to a better understanding and supported a more positive and open attitude

towards Natura 2000. Eventually, this will in the long-term lead to a more successful implementation of Natura 2000.

Also the experiences from Schleswig-Holstein were very valuable for the Smolyan region. Even though it is not yet clear how the work of the NGO will continue in the future an applicable and practical example was given and showed that it is possible to successfully involve the local population and different stakeholders in the management planning of Natura 2000 sites.

8 Measures to ensure the sustainability of the project

Throughout the whole project implementation a broad spectrum of different stakeholders was actively involved. All project actions have been implemented based on the principle of active and constructive dialogue on all levels of interest. This will substantially support the long-term sustainability of the project and its results.

Within the project implementation consultation and discussion on the activities related to the synchronization of FMPs with Natura 2000 objectives was undertaken with several national experts: Georgi Gogushev (RFD Blagoevgrad); Alexander Dountchev (forest expert at WWF Bulgaria); Evgeni Tsavkov (chief assistant in dendrology at the Forestry University, Sofia); Marius Dimitrov (assoc. Prof. at the Forestry University, Sofia); Martin Borisov (chief assistant in forestry at the Forestry University, Sofia); Tsvetan Zlatanov (assoc. Prof. in forestry at the Institute on Forests of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences); Georgi Hinkov (assoc. Prof. in forestry at the Institute on Forests of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences). These experts represent the scientific basis on forestry in Bulgaria and many of them are involved in the teaching and training of experts in the forest sector.

The pilot action for the identification and the marking of habitat trees to ensure their conservation was highly acclaimed by the whole nature conservation and scientific community. This pilot activity, which was possible only with the active support of the SCSFC, is a big step towards sustainable forestry in the region. This best practice example will hopefully be introduced in all forests the SCSFC is managing (about one sixth of Bulgaria's territory) and be multiplied in other regions beyond the territory of the SCSFC.

The newly-established NGO "Iniciativa Tsigansko gradishte" is an important pre-condition for the future sustainable management of the site. The support by a local company and the municipality is of great importance to ensure its sustainability. The official designation of the SCIs in Bulgaria is an important step to be made by the MOEW. Hopefully after the completion of the current Natura 2000 mapping project this will be the next step in the implementation process of Natura 2000 in Bulgaria

The project outcomes have also been presented to the Nature Parks Directorates. During a national meeting organized by the Bulgarian Parks Association external experts of the project presented the innovative project activities and outcomes as well as the relevant publications (manual on dead wood management, brochure on biotope tree marking, please refer to action 2). The project brochure containing main outcomes of the project (please see action 4) was distributed in a wider circle

The participation of an NGO representative in the workgroup on amendments in forestry legislation and the development of a NFSP at the national level was a valuable possibility to distribute the project results and to promote the concept of sustainable forestry within the forestry sector. In Bulgaria mainly NGOs are promoting sustainable forestry. In the case of the workgroup on amendments in forestry legislation and development of the NFSP the cooperation of NGOs is of high relevance for the further process as it might lead to a binding regulation that integrates Natura 2000 objectives into the forest management planning.

The project activities also attracted international attention and could serve as an example for forest management at EU-level. A process was launched by the European Commission (co-organised by the Directorate-General for the Environment and the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development) for the development of a guidance for Forestry and Natura 2000 which was coordinated by the subcontracted consortium Ecosystems LTD and N2k Group. During stakeholder workshops Member States were asked to provide suitable case studies. Both from Polish and from German experts the proposal was made to include the Smolyan experience in a case study of the future EU guidance document.

In order to support the communication about the project and its results the publications and manuals developed in the project were an important tool. They substantially contribute to its sustainability. All products from the project were highly appreciated by interested parties and the experience gained was communicated at different levels. The NGO representative in the workgroup on amendments in forestry legislation and development of the NFSP has used the developed and tested approach on the synchronization of FMPs with Natura 2000 objectives and the concept on management of dead wood in the proposals for the strategy.

The developed manual “Inventory and management of dead wood in forest ecosystems” was met with a great response and highly valued by experts in the forestry sector including the forest research institutions. It is a useful book with practical ideas that can be put easily into practice. Also the final project brochure with all manuals and guidelines developed in the project will be a useful toolkit for all experts from environmental authorities and the forest sector and will support them to integrate Natura 2000 requirements in the FMPs.

9 Photo Documentation

Participation in the second meeting of the forest committee of SFU Mihalkovo (Action 1)



Regional workshop on methods and ways of sustainable forest management in Natura 2000 sites (Action 2.1)



Training seminar on the development of projects and the use of existing mechanisms to finance sustainable forest management (Action 2.2)



Study tour to Black Forest (Action 2.3)



Training on biotope trees marking (Action 2.4)







Impressions of SCI Tsigansko Gradishte (Action 3)





Individual meetings with stakeholders of SCI Tsigansko gradishte (Action 3.2)





Joint meetings of stakeholders of SCI Tsigansko gradishte (Action 3.3)





Final workshop (Action 4)



10 Products of the project

S. Lazarov (2013): Identification and protection of trees important for biodiversity – biotope trees (*in Bulgarian*)

S. Lazarov, D. Petrova and S. Lazarova (2013): Inventory and management of dead wood in forest ecosystems (*in Bulgarian*)

S. Lazarov, D. Petrova, S. Lazarova and D. Popova-Todorova (2013): Building capacity for sustainable management of forests in Natura 2000 sites in the Smolyan region. (*in Bulgarian*)

All three brochures can be downloaded under

http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/Metodi-za-ustoychivo-upravlenie-na-gorite/file.indexdetails.file/menu_id.109/lang.2/

11 Further information

Project webpage

http://greenbalkans.org/natura2000/smolyan_project/file.index.file/lang.2/

Links to institutions and authorities relevant for Natura 2000 and forestry in Bulgaria and the Smolyan region

Environmental Executive Agency	http://eea.government.bg/
Executive Forestry Agency	http://www.nug.bg/
Ministry of Environment and Water	http://www.moew.government.bg/
Regional Forestry Directorate Smolyan	http://www.smolian.iag.bg/
Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water Smolyan	http://www.riewsm-bg.eu/
SFU Mihalkovo	http://dgsmihalkovo.ucdp-smolian.com/
SFU Smilyan	http://dgssmilian.ucdp-smolian.com/
SFU Zlatograd	http://dgszlatograd.ucdp-smolian.com/
SGU Izvora-Devin	http://dlsizvora.ucdp-smolian.com/
Southern Central State Forestry Company	http://ucdp-smolian.com/

12 List of abbreviations

AA	Appropriate Assessment according to the Habitats Directive
BD	Basin Directorates
BfN	Federal Agency for Nature Conservation
DNP	Directorates of National Parks
EEA	Environmental Executive Agency
EFA	Executive Forestry Agency
EU	European Union
FC	Forest Committee
FCS	Favourable Conservation Status
FMP	Forestry Management Plans
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
MOEW	Ministry of the Environment and Water,
NFSP	National Forestry Strategic Plan
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAF	Priority Action Framework for Natura 2000
PUDOOS	Enterprise for Management of Environmental Activities
RFD	Regional Forestry Directorates
RIEW	Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water
SCI	Sites of Community Interest selected for the Habitats Directive
SCSFC	Southern Central State Forestry Company
SFC	State Forestry Companies
SFU	State Forestry Unit
SGU	State Game Unit
SPA	Special Protected Areas selected for the Birds Directive
ToR	Terms of Reference
UBA	German Federal Environment Agency