



“For becoming a conservationist in South-eastern Europe, you need a lot of idealism.”

Why young nature conservationists have such a hard time in the Balkans

Nataša Crnković could barely believe it: The announcement for the 'Field School' was just published, when her inbox already brimmed over with e-mails and her telephone never rested. The interest in the practical workshop to protect wolves, bears and lynxes was huge. "When we make concrete offers to the young people, they embrace it," the Bosnian is pleased. Nataša Crnković is president of the Center for Environment (CZZS) in Bosnia-Herzegovina – one of the few nature conservation organisations in the country that have managed to become established. On 10 October 2019, Nataša sits on a couch in Mainau Palace. She has travelled to the island on Lake Constance as a mediator between the worlds: she translates between Bosnian and English to facilitate communication between her compatriots, the 'Brave Women of Kruščica' (read more on pages 6–8), and their hosts. In the hustle and bustle of the EuroNatur Award ceremony, she takes the time to report on what it is like to lead a nature conservation organisation in a country where nature conservation has no tradition.

“There is a strong connection to nature in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Nonetheless, young people rarely get active on their own initiative.”

Nataša Crnković, CZZS

Only occasionally does the gleaming disappear from Nataša's eyes – for example when she tells us about how difficult it is to find and keep capable employees. Nature conservation work in Bosnia-Herzegovina all too often is frustrating and energy-sapping. Already the governmental machinery, with its conflicting entities "Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina" and "Republika Srpska", is considered one of the most complicated government systems in the world. It is therefore even more difficult in Bosnia-Herzegovina than in other Balkan countries to gain political support for nature conservation issues. Corruption and nepotism tip the situation over the edge. In addition, there are frozen conflicts between the different population groups, and the economic situation in the country is tense. Just recently Nataša had to accept the leaving of one of her best employees. Like many other young people, he is now trying his luck abroad. Along with the biologist, all the personal knowledge he had built up as a project manager at CZZS, went lost. And it is hard to find a successor. This event was the decisive factor for EuroNatur project manager Mareike Brix to organise the first 'Field School' in Bosnia-Herzegovina together with Nataša's colleagues from CZZS, financially supported by Bernd Thies Foundation.

The practical workshop for the protection of wolves, bears and lynxes was intended to support young people who want to work full-time in nature conservation. "For becoming a conservationist in South-eastern Europe, you need a lot of idealism," says Mareike Brix. Before joining EuroNatur as a project manager, the 34-year-old worked for a nature conservation organisation in Romania. She knows what it means to take on a red tape marathon for obtaining approval for a field research project. She knows how difficult it is to gather important data on the distribution of bears. She often had to fight her way through pathless terrain and burn the midnight oil. Above all, however, in South-eastern Europe it is difficult to gain a foothold in nature conservation at all. "There are hardly any official structures and non-governmental organisations. Anyone interested in such special issues as the biology of large carnivores will be left with nothing," the biologist explains.



photo: Aleksandër Anija Dragomirović



photo: PPNEA

The young nature conservationists learned from renowned experts like Prof. Djuro Huber (photo top left). With over 70 years of age his enthusiasm is still the same. Also Aleksandër Trajçe willingly shared his experience.

“Even at the universities, there are few contact persons.”

Mareike Brix, EuroNatur

The 'Field School' in Bosnia-Herzegovina was therefore fully booked with 15 participants. They learned, among other things, how there can be a peaceful coexistence of wolves, bears and humans, how to collect faecal samples for genetic examination of the bear population, or how to properly use a tranquiliser gun. EuroNatur and CZZS brought together students, hunters, veterinarians, ecologists and foresters from all over Bosnia-Herzegovina for one week in Sutjeska National Park and secured renowned lecturers for the event – among them Dr. Aleksandër Trajçe. “We invited Aleksandër because he is both very familiar with the conditions in the Balkans and has collected experience in Western Europe,” says Mareike Brix.

Aleksandër Trajçe, too, had to overcome obstacles to pursue the job of his dreams. Twelve years ago he was among the first to take part in a training programme organised by EuroNatur for young nature conservationists in Albania and North Macedonia. Among other things, he learned how to find the traces of the rare Balkan lynx and how to use camera traps. This was then complemented by environmental education and sustainable regional development projects in the lynx habitats. During this time he really caught the bug.

“The western Balkans have a great need of well-trained conservationists,” says Aleksandër Trajçe, who is now Managing Director of the Albanian EuroNatur partner organisation Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA). To follow this path required a lot of initiative on Aleksandër's part. At the age of 24, he left his home country Albania to start a master's course in Nature Conservation and Management in Great Britain. He wanted to expand his knowledge, get to know a different culture and gain a new perspective on life. Albania did not offer him any prospects in this respect. “The country's main worry for decades has been economic development and this often impacts negatively on nature. At the universities, corruption, nepotism and political sentiments determine your career opportunities. Even the few jobs in practical nature conservation are rarely awarded to qualified applicants. This system is unattractive for young people who want to make a difference. The only fair labour market in nature conservation in Albania is likely to be provided by non-governmental organisations,” describes Aleksandër. And this market is very small: Because reliable sources of financing are lacking, non-governmental nature conservation organisations in the Balkans find it particularly difficult to plan and implement long-term projects. Often there is also a lack of competence for gaining the long-term financing of projects.

“The Balkan lynx training programme changed my life and I want many young people to have such a chance, too.”

Dr. Aleksandër Trajçe, PPNEA

“For years I have been asked: ‘So when will you get a real job?’ Eventually this question stopped being asked. I guess the people around me understood that protecting nature is a real job. That alone is a success in itself.”

Dr. Aleksandër Trajçe

Getting a place at Oxford University felt like a big win to him. After his studies and doctorate, many doors were open for Aleksandër Trajçe. But he decided to return to Albania and bring his knowledge to his home country. Today Aleksandër is a sought-after conservation expert in the country and beyond – just like most of the other experts invited by Mareike Brix to the 'Field School' in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example Prof. Djuro Huber, a long-standing EuroNatur partner from Croatia. The bear expert is over 70 years old and still passionate about his work. The students were enthusiastic about the chance to benefit from his wealth of experience.

“The atmosphere was excellent. All participants were enthusiastic and fully focused even after an eight-hour day. With the Field School, we pushed open doors.”

Mareike Brix, EuroNatur

After the 'Field School' Mareike and Nataša received a lot of positive feedback. One of the most frequent statements was: "Finally I have good contacts and I know that I'm not alone." The 'Field School' showed the huge existing potential: there are many young people who are interested in nature conservation. Our great chance is in providing them with concrete offers and helping to network them: "By training experts in the field of nature conservation, we want to strengthen civil society and thereby also increase the pressure on decision-makers. And, of course, we at EuroNatur also have a great interest in expanding our network of reliable partners. It is only together with them that we can protect the fascinating nature of the Balkans," says Mareike Brix.



How does a camera trap work? The participants of the field school are eagerly listening and take their chance to know more about the protection of wolves, bears and lynxes. They not only took a certificate back home but also networked with like minded people (photo in the middle, front row, left: EuroNatur project manager Mareike Brix).



photo: Mareike Brix

She was happy to be part of the field school: Dzana Bordanić (on the left).



photo: Aleksandra-Anja Dragamirović



photo: Zdeněk Macháček /unsplash - Brown bear (Ursus arctos)

Four questions for a participant of the 'Field School'

The 'Field School' in Sutjeska National Park was attended by 15 motivated young people from Bosnia-Herzegovina, including 27-year-old ecologist Džana Bordanić. She had been waiting for such an opportunity for a long time:

What was it like for you to be one of the participants of the „Field School“?

This was the very first event of its kind in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I was very happy and excited to be selected out of about 60 applicants and to have the chance to learn from highly respected experts.

Why was this such a great opportunity for you?

I was very eager to learn about wolves, brown bears and lynxes, but at the university I had very few opportunities. The lynxes are particularly endangered and we need to protect them urgently. Participating in the Field School was a first big step for me to better understand the ecology of these animals, and I had the opportunity to combine practice and theory.

What impressed you most about the Field School?

The passion with which the lecturers talked about wolves, bears and lynxes was truly amazing. I could clearly see and feel their love and desire to protect these animals. It's great how much valuable knowledge I gained in just seven days.

What important lessons do you take home from the Field School?

I realized that wolves, bears and lynxes can only survive if many stakeholders work together: biologists, hunters, foresters, farmers, the local population, conservation organisations and government agencies.

Text and interview: Katharina Grund