



Land of
Eagles and
Castles

SEMINAR

MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED AREAS AND ADVOCACY FOR NATURE

7 April
2022

Destil Creative Hub, Tirana
Online



Bulgarian Society for
the Protection of Birds





CEPF 108570 - Land of Eagles and Castles: Integrated Participatory
Management for Albanian Coastal Biodiversity

SEMINAR

Management of protected areas and advocacy for nature

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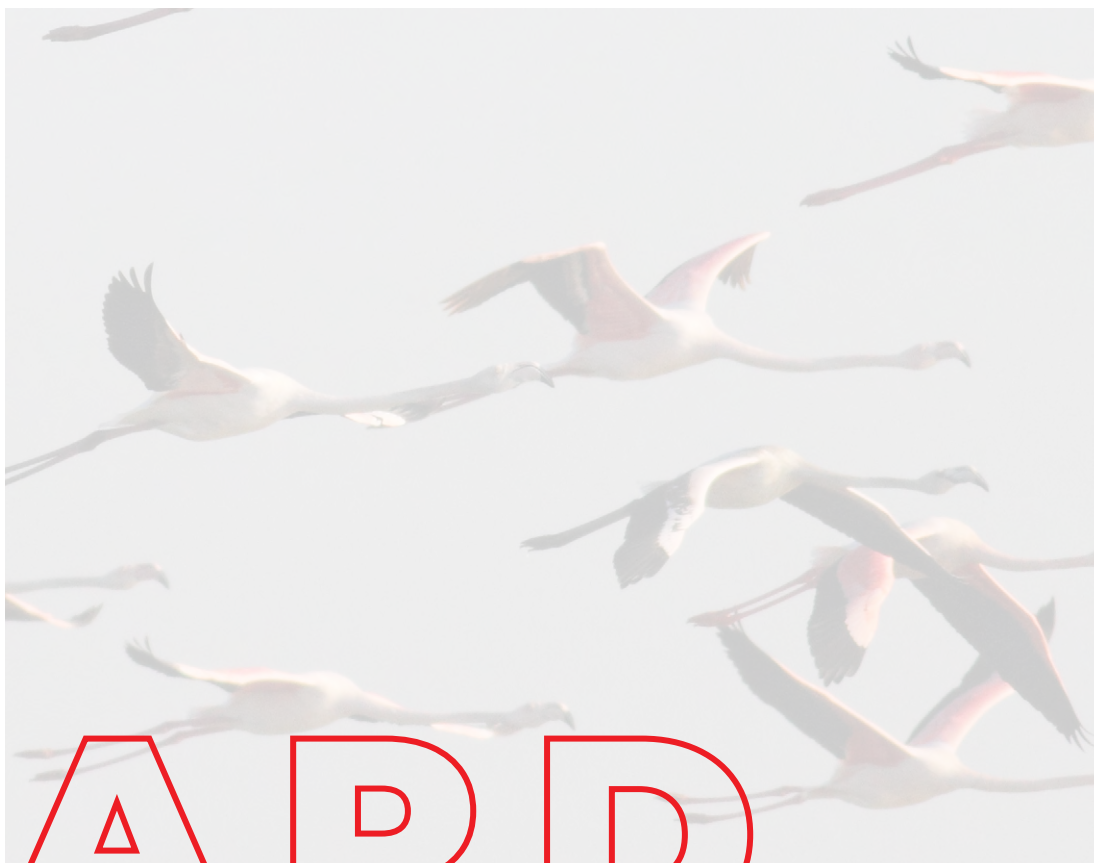
Coastal protected areas are among the most precious habitats and ecosystems services, same as the most wanted ones from humans and their activities which have put these areas under serious pressure. The increase of population, exploitation of natural resources, high concentration of society in the coastal areas, and demand for mass tourism have threatened the biodiversity in coastal areas, causing engineer, pollution, and numerous other issues. Due to the above factors, in the last 30 years Albanian protected areas, especially wetlands along

the coast, have been constantly under pressure and the pressure is still ongoing. Therefore, a strategic managing tool such as integrated coastal management is needed, with the help of stakeholders, to ensure sustainable development by conserving and managing natural biodiversity and resources.

Land of Eagles and Castles: Integrated Participatory Management for Albanian Coastal Biodiversity is working in two coastal Key Biodiversity Areas in Albania,

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Narta KBA and Butrinti KBA, addressing some of the above-mentioned threats to these international important areas, by implementing an integrated coastal management approach. By engaging stakeholders, local communities, local business sector, and government institutions, adopting sustainable practices that deliver positive impacts for conservation.

Preservation of coastal areas, community engagement, and advocacy for nature conservation has been the targeted topics for the hybrid seminar “Management of

protected areas and advocacy for nature conservation” organized on the 7th of April 2022. National and international lectures joined the seminar and presented their work and shared their experience on the preservation of nature in coastal protected areas. Their experience and lessons learned will help us to address environmental issues and design strategic documents or guidelines to address actual and ongoing cases.



Monitoring and conservation in Vjosë-Nartë

Vjosa-Narta Protected Area is located in the southwestern part of Albania, covering a surface of around 19.000 hectares, and is one of the best and most important wetland ecosystems in Albania and the Mediterranean region. Albanian government proclaimed a protected landscape Category V (According to IUCN). In addition, Vjosë-Narta is part of almost all international ecological networks that a natural site in Albania could be a part of. It is recognized as an 'Important Bird Area' (IBA), 'Key Biodiversity Area' (KBA), and a candidate site for the Emerald Network.

For many years, PPNEA has been involved in data collection through systematic monitoring, mostly on birds, and lastly implementing conservation action in this area towards targeted species. In addition, dedicated data has been collected related to mammals, reptilians, amphibians, and habitats.

Besides yearly mid census monitoring, we have monitored breeding birds in different years, and both these monitoring will continue in the future. From the data collected there are more than 200 wild bird species have been recorded in the area. There are at least 15.000 birds counted during the international waterbird census. Meanwhile, the data collected show that Vjosë-Narta is the most important breeding site in Albania and one of the most important in Europe for several species of Charadriiformes order, which have populations that go beyond 1% of the total population within the biogeographic region, such is the case of the pied avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta* - biogeographic region of Southeast Europe, the Black Sea and Turkey). In addition, the area regularly sustains more than 1% of the populations of several species of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea region, such as the Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*), flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*), and others.

Finally, we have implemented several conservation actions aiming to mitigate some threats for some bird species. Conservation actions such as (i) artificial island for terns; (ii) fence to help breeding colony of flamingos; (iii) cleaning vegetation for terns breeding population; (iv) bird sticker set on the highway to mitigate bird collision etc.

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Vjosa - Narta Protected Area Management

There are several protected areas in the region of Vlora, including 3 National Parks, 4 Natural Parks, 1 Protected Landscape and 85 Nature Monuments, most of them Coastal and wetland habitats. The work of the RAPA is focused in two sectors: Monitoring and Management. The monitoring team is focused on the monitoring of the flora and fauna, Biodiversity protection, training of the young rangers etc while the management team is focused on the promotion of outdoor activities, management of the information centers, environmental education, and Social and cultural values.

Among the wetland habitats in the PA of Vlora, the Narta lagoon and Narta salina are the ones with high importance nationally and internationally. They represent a complex with high values for resting and breeding of more than 200 bird species, high plants biodiversity and habitats etc. RAPA Vlore is implementing different monitoring and research activities on different biodiversity groups like: Loggerhead sea turtle, plants, periodic monitoring of Birds, water bird census, breeding birds monitoring etc, in collaboration with NGO-s and Ornithologists. Intensive work is done also on Tourism and education sector, by promoting the natural values of the area creation of new trails, involving young generations in outdoor activities etc.

Summary of the presentation



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Threats to a wetland protected area: the case of Poda Lagoon (Bulgaria)

Analysys of the threats to Poda Protected Site (100.7 ha) is presented. Amongst the natural/non-manageable threats most serious are Climate change effects (changes in the water level, extreme weather phenomenae, drought), Natural succession (reed-bed coverage, sediments, vegetation composition), Epidemiologic events (Bird Flu, COVID19), Abrasion. Actions with partial effect were undertaken: reed-bed control, anti-abrasion constructions. There are significant and numerous anthropogenic/partly manageable factors: presence of a busy road and bycycle lane, powerlines, increasing use of drones, urbanization, sea pollution, illegal depositing of waste, increasing tourist pressure, legal and illegal netting at adjacent sea, overfishing at Burgas Bay, direct disturbance of the birds, invasive species of plants and animals, accidental fires, stray dogs and cats. All they cause mortalities, disturbance, pollution and potential insulation effect on the site, loss of habitats, worsening the food base for key species, inhabiting the protected site. Understaffing and insufficient institutional support is also considered a threat.

Since the very beginning of taking its role of a management body for Poda Protected Site (1989), BSPB – BirdLife Bulgaria works on different ways to reduce, eliminate or mitigate these threats. By establishing Poda Nature Centre (1997), developing a Management Plan for Poda (1997) and by consistent direct conservation measures most of these threats are under control. Important elements of the complex of anti-threats activities is creating a scientific base for the conservation actions, involving authorities and stakeholders, developing birdwatching tourism as motivation tool to protect the site. Extremely important was the success BSPB had in attracting international support for conservation of Poda – from the early 1990th help of the Swiss Confederation (thanks to which the Poda Centre was established) to the EU LIFE Programme, withing which the management activities in the last decades were done.

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Conservation of a globally threatened species: Red Breasted Goose

Red Breasted Goose bleeds is a species that breeds only in Arctic Siberia, and its IUCN global status is venerable. It covers almost 6000 km one way along its migration from breeding grounds to wintering, crossing five countries and two continents. The work on Red Breasted Goose in Bulgaria started in 1990s when local volunteers and BSPB/ Birdlife Bulgaria registered high number of the species. Since then, several projects are running. There are several threats to this species in the wintering areas in Bulgaria, like Poaching and disturbance during the hunting season, poisoning by rodenticides and generally agricultural pesticides, illegal fishing, uncontrolled development of wind-farm energy, and tourism infrastructure in the feeding and roosting areas. The main focus of the conservation work throughout the years is to collaborate with authorities and to reduce poaching and illegal killing and fishing disturbance, gain knowledge and information on the feeding habitat selection of the species, evaluate the impact of goose grazing on the crop yields in order to create mitigation measures and reduce conflict with farmers, develop national species action plan, assess the risk of infrastructure and raise awareness on the general public. Different methods are used for research, like cannon nets and telemetry who helped in new findings like new key area of the species in Rumania and also detected changing wintering sites between years depending on weather conditions showing also the negative impacts of the climate change.

Summary of the presentation

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Conservation of priority habitat Coastal Lagoons in Atanasovsko Lake Natura 2000 site

Located within the periphery of the city of Burgas, Atanasovsko Lake is significant area recognized as a Ramsar site and maintained reserve. Along with that, it is part of the Natura 2000 network under the Bird and the Habitat Directives (SAC & SPA BG000270). Atanasovsko Lake is a place of traditional salt production and home for 334 bird species. The costal part of Natura 2000 site contains priority conservation habitats such as 1150* Coastal lagoons, 1310 Salicornia and other annual species and 1410 Mediterranean salt meadows. The main threats influencing the biodiversity richness and habitat stability are related to unexpected extreme weather events, such as floods and water regime disturbance; unbalanced urbanization, that leads to fragmentation and isolation of the habitats; decline of water quality conditions due to the pollution; and risk of abonnement of traditional salt production.

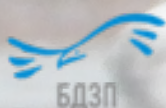
In order to prevent and regulate these threats restoration activities on the dike-channel system are applied, as well as reconstruction of the salt production infrastructure is in progress. These activities compliment the biodiversity by providing favorable nesting, feeding, and resting areas for birds.

Another important aspect is the monitoring process. For this purpose, drone technology is used and a matrix for integrated monitoring of the 1150* habitat is developed. The matrix takes into account the specifics of Atanasovsko Lake in terms of salt production, salinity dynamics and conservation activities.

Based on the nature conservation and monitoring actions, capacity building program for wetland management is developed and included into the M.Sc programs of two universities. Thus, we aim to train environmental specialists who can tackle complex nature conservation issues.



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Public involvement in the coastal habitat management

Public involvement is a fundamental tool for integrated management of coastal areas. Nowadays, the tendency shows that coastal stakeholders and communities are becoming more and more interested in the management of these areas. The mechanisms of public participation require partnership at all stakeholder levels, based on careful planning and strategic approach.

Though the years Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF) encourages the civil society involvement in shaping societal values, beliefs and social norms by providing a platform to participate in natural resource management and defending public rights. One crucial aspect of civil society participation is to inform and involve local people by creating civil initiatives and working groups.

Another very successful tool for dialog and collaboration are the public councils. They are main consultation mechanism BBF has been using to involve entrepreneurs, local and national government policymakers, scientists, representatives of sector associations (of farmers, hunters, teachers), protected areas (PAs) managers, and community leaders. A vivid example is the Public Council for Atanasovsko Lake established in 2013. Since then this form of civil involvement shows us that participants with different competencies and positions can influence the decision-making process at the local level. This tool becomes a solid foundation for further collaboration within the whole region. Thus, in 2019 the council participants began to think towards a common vision for the development of the Atanasovsko Lake region by integrating nature conservation and urban planning.

BBF persistently works towards engaging local communities in nature conservation by integrating informal education activities, cultural and sport event with a nature cause. By doing so we aim to generate care capacity and attachment for the environment.



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Creation and maintenance of networks of local supporters

The illegal use of poison against wildlife is deeply rooted in the Balkans and in the mentality of rural communities across the peninsula. Despite it is an illegal activity, the use of poisonous baits is still widely used to exterminate predators and considered a major threat to wildlife and humans too. Although a complex approach is needed to tackle this threat, informed stakeholders aware of the consequences of the use of poison is the first step towards a change in the mentality and culture of local communities. Hence, the Balkan network of stakeholders against wildlife poisoning aims to engage relevant stakeholders and make them play an active role in the fight against poison.

The Balkan network of stakeholders against wildlife poisoning started in Greece and spread across Albania, Bulgaria and North Macedonia in the Egyptian vulture areas where the problems with poisoning are the most severe. Any local or authority that would like to commit to prevent the use of poisons can join the network. They can be either local land users (such as stockbreeders, beekeepers, hunters, etc.) or public authorities (Forestry, Regional Environmental Inspectorates, mayors of villages, etc.). The concept of the Network is that, we, as nature conservationists and the Egyptian vulture New LIFE project stand by the stakeholders, providing support with any means available; in their turn, they are our valuable allies in the fight to save the Egyptian vulture (and many other species), against wildlife poisoning. To create this bond with local land users and authorities the project team contacts and keeps up with the local stakeholders, helping them to sustain their livelihood through direct support such as giving away electric fences, guarding dogs, vet care for their animals, reconstruction of watering places for animals. Furthermore, local stakeholders might also get useful information and be supported if they have problems with documents and other needs related to their animals. Thus, the support and the friendships within the network would ultimately lead to the shift in the mentality of others who are not part of the network, because in first place the Network of local stakeholders mostly stands on the personal contacts and relationships that build up trust and support, and mostly fight for the greater good of both sides.



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Local Action Group in Vjosa-Narta

Albania, just like the other Balkan countries, is known for its rich natural and biodiversity values. With a large number of endemic species, as well as characteristic habitats, our country is of international importance regarding nature conservation. These values in Albania are preserved through the national network of protected areas. For this reason, the efficient and financially sustainable management of protected areas, through the involvement of local communities and civil society is crucially important, offering sustainable alternatives for the coexistence of nature and human beings.

PPNEA together with relevant institutions and the local community is working in Vjosa-Narta Protected Landscape to establish the first Local Action Group in this area, dedicated to the preservation of nature and promoting sustainable development of this region.

Following the LEADER approach (EU), Local Action Group (LAG) are decentralized institutions consisting of a range of local private and public organizations representing different interest groups, with the main goal of promoting and ensuring local economic and sustainable development. The mission of LAGs is to ensure sound and long-term conservation and support sustainable regional development in the Vjosa-Narta region together with the local population as active drivers.

Summary of the presentation

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Data on biodiversity and threats: collection and management

It is important to use integrated systems like database, web applications, or mobile applications for field data collection. It helps a lot in the centralization of data and their management, because it makes it easier to collect data, share them with other parties and also to analyze them. It is very helpful for field trip because it saves time and decreases the errors in data entry. SmartBirds is an Internal based information system and mobile app for collecting biodiversity data, developed by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds. Its purpose is to serve as an electronic notebook for the storage of records from observations of birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles protected and other invertebrates. The recording of each observation supports the conservation activities in Bulgaria but also can be used in other countries.

Through the mobile application SmartBirds Pro each of us can contribute to establishing the trends of the populations of wild birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles protected and other invertebrates. It contains photos of the birds, maps with their distribution and information on what they look like, what they feed on, what habitats they prefer, and where they can be observed. There is also general information on weather conditions (temperature, wind direction, clouds etc), approximate date and time of observation, location, behavior and status of species. All the data can be easily exported from the application and archived.

Summary of the presentation

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Urbanization and future threats. Case study: Atanasovsko Lake and Burgas

The lagoon Atanasovsko Lake, as a complex landscape system, is a vivid example where the ecological status and biodiversity richness closely depend on the human activities. On one hand we have the traditional salt production process that benefits the ecological diversity and on the other fast urban dynamics of the growing city Burgas.

Known as the largest seaport in Bulgaria, Burgas is expanding industrial, cultural, and tourist center with key economic functions. Atanasovsko Lake together with its adjacent Natura 2000 area are in immediate nexus with the city. Situated in-between the urban coastline, suburban periphery, rural lands and satellite districts, the area is exposed to constant pressure due to intensive developments and competing land uses. Example for this is the building of housing and recreational buildings on the coast line, industrial developments into the Northwestern peri-urban side on the city, as well as the construction of new high-speed transport infrastructures. Together with that, the negative anthropogenic pressure rises: unregulated greywater discharge and additional surface runoff flows directly to the lagoon's bypass channel which increases the flood risks and the direct pollution of the Black Sea.

By studying urban growth dynamics on the watershed level the lagoon's systemic vulnerable areas were determined, such as canalized brook/river beds and the crossings with the induration and transport infrastructure, the retention waterbodies especially within the urban fabric, and the bypass channel.

To tackle these issues a planning approach on landscape systems level with a tactical combination of small-scale local intervention is needed. Such approach opens multiple possibilities for integrating nature areas and urban processes. Such as increased connectivity between Burgas and its satellite districts, supporting healthy lagoon-river system by green corridors and allowing space for natural water regulation and filtration.



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Threats in Vjosa-Narta PA: Airport issue & advocacy

Vjosa-Narta Protected Landscape is one of the best and most important wetland ecosystems of Albania and the Mediterranean. Besides being part of Albanian's Protected Area Network, Vjosë-Narta is part of almost all international ecological networks that a natural site in Albania could be a part of. This wetland is recognized as an (i) 'Important Bird Area' (IBA) with ID site "AL005" because meets the criteria A1, A4i, A4iii, B1i; (ii) This area is recognized as a 'Key Biodiversity Area' (KBA), known as (Vjosë-Pishë Poro-Laguna e Nartës) and ID site ALB24; (iii) Officially nominated by the Albanian government as a candidate site for the Emerald Network; (iv) Meets the criteria to be classified as a 'Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, Criteria II, and VII.

During monitoring, we have identified several threats on this site and tried to address them through mitigation or preservation of the area. The most significant threats identified on this site are the revision of the protected area, water pollution, collision, logging/forest fires, fishing nets, and the most significant threats up to date, the construction of the airport within the protected area.

Despite the CSO's attempts, national and international, to prevent this threat, the plans of the Albanian government for the urbanization of this protected area aren't planned to stop. The first efforts started in 2018 and in the same year, right after PPNEA started to oppose these plans and an advocacy strategy was set in place to preserve the area and prevent the construction of the airport within this site. Together with national and international NGOs there have been sent several letters, to Albanian authorities and international institutions/conventions, protests have been organized, dedicated communication campaigns, workshops, training, etc. Furthermore, additional dedicated actions are being taken towards this issue aiming to stop these huge grey infrastructures and promote sustainable development.

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Management of risks to humans and biodiversity. Case study: Burgas Airport in the proximity of Natura 2000 site Atanasovsko Lake

Burgas Airport is the 2nd largest airport in Bulgaria, its runways are positioned in a very close nexus to the lagoon Atanasovsko Lake. Even though the aerodrome is active mainly in the summer tourist season, it faces many flight-safety challenges related to bird-strikes. This is not surprising because within the 13-km zone around the control station is the richest place on birds in Bulgaria.

There are several factors that increase the risk of bird-strikes. Firstly, the seasonal migration on the main bird flyway – Via Pontica. Here more than 1.5 million birds (storks, pelicans, raptors) are traversing the sky every year. Secondly, the position of intensive agriculture field next to the airport area is an unappropriated land use. Thirdly, the day-and-night bird migration trajectories which depends on the location of feeding hotspots, such as municipal landfills and other wetlands. It is studied that the bird-strikes are caused by synanthropic bird species, wetland species and birds of prey, mainly originating from the open agriculture lands and the lagoon. The conducted statistical comparisons show that even though 45% of the total flights per years are over Atanasovsko Lake the collisions do not depend on the number of flights. Most likely they depend on the biological specifics of the bird species.

The risk management program has two aspects. On one hand, system of 35 devices for repelling birds is established. And on the other hand, prevention and mitigation measures are developed. They include ornithological forecasts, regular reports for bird species distribution, permanent presence of a wildlife control offices, DNA analyses of birds' remains and others.

To sum up, the proximity of the airport to the lagoon mainly causes indirect disturbance for the birds as anxiety, stress, gas pollution, noise and vibrations. It is assumed that the birds adapt. The risk is higher for the airplane control and the passengers. Thus, due to the challenging location of the aerodrome, the Burgas Airport spends a lot of resources to mitigate and prevent risks of bird-strikes.



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Case work: Advocacy Strategy and Policy to Conserve SPAs

After several attempts to conserve nature from the grey infrastructures or devastating plans that may devastate the ecological integrity of a protected area, it might be useful to synergies your actions and work on a more strategic approach, to effectively communicate and influence a target audience who can deliver your objective. Under such circumstances, a dedicated advocacy strategy is needed, with a clear aim, objectives, actions and resources. Advocacy or simply 'protecting public interests' is a system of interrelated actions or steps aimed at long-term changes in society or the way political decisions are made through activating citizens. An advocacy strategy assesses the actual situation and determines how to achieve your objectives and effective strategy is rooted clarification of key steps such as objectives, messages, messengers, partners, audience, resources, and evaluation.

Summary of the presentation

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First and foremost among these were the speakers, who accepted our invitation and held extraordinary presentations by sharing their experiences and work, and the audience who curiously joined and jointly discussed important issues in this seminar.

We would like to, especially thank “The Lagoon of LIFE” (Maintain the Man-Lake Symbiosis for the Benefit of Species and Habitats of EU conservation concern / LIFE17 NAT/BG/000558) project team, which helped in the organization of the event.

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