

Enlarge EU Newsletter JUNE 2008 Edition

Ecotourism in Macedonia

Ecotourism is a tourism which directly or indirectly promotes and supports sustainable economic development. Ecotourism can generate financial support for the formation, management and protection of natural areas. Having no coast, Macedonia can not pretend to become a mass-tourism destination like Croatia or Montenegro. The geographical and climatic conditions of Macedonia are to favour the development of tourism in an ecological environment.

Therefore, Macedonia should follow the example of small countries with very rich natural and ecological reserves such as Costa Rica or Nepal, for which ecotourism has become an important source of income. **The drawback of ecotourism, like any kind of tourism, is that it can lead to a certain loss of values or customs, that is why Macedonia should implement very carefully ecotourism facilities with the outside assistance of NGO's for a backup option due to uncertainties of the tourism market.**

Modest Beginnings

In December 2007, the Ministry of economy of Macedonia finally announced a development strategy for tourism until 2012. The strategy aims to create more than 2,000 new jobs and to improve by 28% the foreign and domestic investment in the tourism sector.

Ecotourism is still at a starting stage in Macedonia. Nevertheless, several local initiatives have already been undertaken: in the Skopje region, five ecotourism zones have been selected: Vodno-Matka, Jakupica, Taor, Katlanovo and Skopska Crna Gora. The political party DOM is setting up an eco-village in Babino and is promoting cultural tourism in Vitoliste in Mariovo district. A Macedonian emigrant is trying to renew in an environmental friendly way the village of Janse in Reka region in order to prevent the inhabitants to leave the village. But until now, the most significant ongoing projects are implemented with international cooperation: the project "Sustainable development through ecotourism and environmental education in protected areas", financed by the German agency GTZ, is implemented in Galicica National Park by the Alliance for Lake Cooperation in Ohrid and Prespa with the help of six NGOs from Serbia, Albania and Bulgaria.

Big Potential

EU funds, through the pre-accession assistance and neighbourhood policy, are good source for developing eco-tourism. Through the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU is financing the development of ecotourism in Bosilovo and Monospitovo and a project for nature protection in the cross boarder zone of Dupnica-Kriva Palanka. This also helps Macedonia to follow Bulgarian examples where ecotourism is at a more developed state. Bilateral initiatives aiming promotion of ecotourism need also to be taken in consideration, like the pilot ecotourism project implemented by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Brajcino area.

Macedonia has a considerable potential for ecotourism with not less than 33 natural conservation areas. International cooperation can really help Macedonia for the capacity building and organizational development of ecotourism but it is to the government to have a clear strategy: it is its role to take the optimal decisions and to create proper conditions for ecotourism so that the actors concerned could effectively benefit from it. The state has really to engage Macedonia into the niche of ecotourism through marketing campaign and to become conscious of the advantages from the respect of Macedonian nature. Indeed, ecotourism is unsustainable without ecology, so real efforts have to be done to clean the country and to improve individual awareness on environmental issues, so that 2009 could really become the year for green initiatives in Macedonia.

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QUICK FACTS:

Number of tourists (2006): 499, 473 (total)
 domestic: 297, 116;
 foreign: 202, 357 ;
 Number of tourists in Lake Ohrid: 250, 000
 domestic and foreign in 2007;
 Employees: around 11, 000;
 Increase of employment (2007-08): 41.4%
 Countries of origin of tourists (mostly):
 Serbia: 17%; Greece : 11%; Bulgaria : 9%;
 Albania : 7%.