



## Case study // Round Table SDG 15: Biodiversity at the Heart of Sustainable Development - Toward Transformation and Resilience

### Sustainable tourism development through the Carpathian Convention

**Poland**

*Level: national*

#### Summary

Through the project Carpathians Unite, the provisions of the Protocol on Biodiversity and the Protocol on Sustainable Tourism of the Carpathian Convention have been promoted in the Polish Carpathians. The project aimed to protect the biological and landscape diversity of the Polish Carpathians. It combined conservation efforts, sustainable land use, the preservation of traditional land use and local livestock breeds with activities that promote sustainable tourism.

#### Situation

The Carpathian region represents one of the most biologically outstanding ecosystems in the world covering a total area of about 190 000 km<sup>2</sup> and inhabited by more than 17 million people. Shared by seven Central and Eastern European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine, the Carpathians constitute Europe's second most extensive mountain range after the Alps and consist of a myriad of natural landscapes of great ecological value. The region is also crucial source of freshwater. In addition to three major rivers: the Danube and Dniester, flowing into the Black Sea and the Vistula, which flows into the Baltic Sea, its numerous lakes and water reservoirs supply clean water for communities, including for agriculture and industries. The Carpathians, as the green heart of Europe, host the continent's most significant areas of virgin forest and natural forest, and provide habitats for endemic species and Europe's largest wolf and brown bear and lynx populations. The Carpathian area is a living environment inhabited by millions of people, but is subject to a variety of threats and adverse impacts from land abandonment, habitat conversion and fragmentation, deforestation, climate change, and large scale migration to industrialization, pollution, and exploitation of natural resources.

In response to these hazards and challenges, the seven Central and Eastern European countries established an intergovernmental treaty pursuing comprehensive policy and cooperation in order to guarantee protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians, namely the Framework Convention on Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians<sup>1</sup> (Carpathian Convention) in 2003, in force since 2006. It is the only multi-level governance mechanism covering the whole of the Carpathian area and besides the Alpine Convention the second sub-regional treaty-based regime for the protection and sustainable development of a mountain region worldwide.

The common vision of the Parties to the Carpathian Convention is to guarantee protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians. The improvement of the quality of life, the strengthening of local economies and communities, and the conservation of natural values and cultural heritage should go hand in hand in the Carpathian area. The Convention provides a framework for cooperation

<sup>1</sup><http://www.carpathianconvention.org/text-of-the-convention.html>

and multi-sectoral policy coordination, a platform for joint strategies for sustainable development, and a forum for dialogue between all stakeholders involved – from the local communities and various NGO's up to the regional and national Governments, Institutions of the European Union and the United Nations.

In Poland, the Carpathian region comprises ca. 6% of the land area of the country in three regions: Małopolskie, Podkarpackie and Śląskie; it includes mountains, foothills, as well as valleys and mountain basins. In comparison with other regions of the country, the Carpathians are distinguished by a low degree of urbanisation and industrialisation, extensive forests and traditional farming. More than a half of this area is covered by at least one area-related form of nature protection, which is proof of the immense natural wealth of this part of Poland. The natural value of Polish Carpathians is emphasised by the fact that there are as many as 6 national parks (Babia Góra, Gorce, Tatra, Pieniny, Magura and Bieszczady) and 13 landscape parks belonging to the Carpathian Network of Protected Areas, supplemented with 7 protected landscape areas, which gives a total of almost 70% of the Polish Carpathian area covered with one of the aforementioned forms of nature protection. Natural areas were preserved mainly in regions, which have for a long time been covered by nature protection, or are particularly difficult to access due to their topography, which is crucial for preserving many rare and endangered ecosystems and species, particularly those characterised by an endemic distribution. On the other hand, in more accessible areas, where silviculture and agriculture are maintained, many semi-natural habitats developed, including open habitats with extensive ecotone zones, of significant importance for preserving biological and landscape diversity of the Carpathians.

### Strategy

The Carpathian Convention established numerous thematic working groups, which consist of representatives of governments, national experts, and representatives of civil society, non-governmental organizations and various other relevant stakeholders. The governments consider work concocted by the working groups. These working groups are responsible for elaboration of the thematic Protocols to the Carpathian Convention, which provide provisions that are more specific. Until now, the following five thematic Protocols have been elaborated and adopted:

- Protocol on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological and Landscape Diversity (Protocol on Biodiversity) (2008)
- Protocol on Sustainable Forest Management (2011)
- Protocol on Sustainable Tourism (2011)
- Protocol on Sustainable Transport (2014)
- Protocol on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (2017)

The thematic Protocols have been ratified by most Carpathian countries, and Poland has been giving a good example by undertaking concrete actions implementing their provisions. It is well demonstrated by the project "**Carpathians Unite – mechanism of consultation and cooperation for implementation of the Carpathian Convention**"<sup>2</sup> that has been implemented by the project consortium led by the UNEP/GRID-Warsaw Centre ([www.gridw.pl](http://www.gridw.pl)). The project was co-financed by Switzerland under the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme.

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.konwencjajakarpacka.pl/>

The project's main goal was to protect the biological and landscape diversity of the Polish Carpathians by supporting the implementation of the provisions of the Carpathian Convention, especially the Protocol on Biodiversity and the Protocol on Sustainable Tourism. It combined conservation efforts, sustainable land use, the preservation of traditional land use and local livestock breeds with activities that promoted sustainable tourism development, increased public participation in the implementation of the convention, and provided information on the natural and cultural heritage of the region.

### Results and impact

The objectives of the Carpathians Unite project were achieved by:

- **maintaining and developing traditional sheep grazing in mountain pastures and semi-natural meadows**, protecting traditional breeds of livestock and supporting the revival of the pastoral tradition;
- reducing the negative impacts of tourism on natural areas by drafting a **regional sustainable tourism development strategy** for a selected part of the Carpathians;
- **improving access to information on the Carpathians**, their natural and cultural heritage, tourist infrastructure and actions undertaken for the implementation of the convention by launching the web portal "Carpathian Informatorium" to present data on the Polish Carpathians using geoinformation techniques, and by conducting a series of trainings and lectures;
- creating a network for information exchange among institutions and bodies working for the implementation of the Carpathian Convention; and
- ensuring public participation in the implementation of the Carpathian Convention by creating a wide platform for public consultation and support for thematic working groups.

One very tangible result of the project is the elaboration of **"The Strategy for the sustainable development of tourism in the Magical Land of Lemko and Pogorzanie in the years 2015-2020"** that was developed with the participation of 38 neighbouring Carpathian municipalities. Its geographic range covers the area of 3 550 km<sup>2</sup>. The strategy defines 5 priority areas and translates them into strategic goals and programmes that are intended to support their achievement. This way it constitutes a useful tool for local municipalities that helps them to apply the rules of sustainable tourism in fragile Carpathian ecosystems.

### Challenges and lessons learned

Main challenges encountered during project implementation included:

- i) ensuring efficient cooperation between Carpathian stakeholders,
- ii) insufficient institutional frameworks to effectively cope with development needs and conflicts (development strategies, land-use planning).

Lessons learned:

- i) coordinated activities prove effective and have a potential to bring synergy effects if there is sufficient engagement and cooperation between stakeholders,
- ii) sustainable development should be adequately addressed in the policy frameworks, strategy and planning documents.



### **Potential for replication**

Coordination and cooperation mechanisms applied in a multi-stakeholder settings can be used elsewhere. Sustainable tourism development strategy as well as best practice in land-use planning could well serve as model solutions.

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