

## Development of protected areas in the Western Balkans

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**Abstract:** Protected areas in the Western Balkans face their own challenges, which have changed over time in line with the political and socio-cultural development of the region. The protection efforts began in the 19th century, aiming to protect small areas representing landscapes with significant aesthetic or cultural values. During the 20th century, with the increase in scientific knowledge about nature, the purpose of protection transformed into a more ecological approach. Nowadays, maintaining sustainability is the most often claimed aim in relation to protected areas in the Dinaric Mountain range. The number and size of protected areas have been relatively modest, but during recent decades they have increased progressively. In the past, the main challenges faced by authorities were creating institutions responsible for the management of protected areas, developing a legal framework for their functioning and establishing protected areas themselves. Today, the increase in the number of protected areas poses new challenges to be met by the Western Balkans countries and their administrations. The role of protected areas is being transformed and reinterpreted through development in national policies as well as in local economic activities that impact the sustainable management and functioning of local communities. Addressing these challenges requires a more holistic approach crossing cultural and political borders among nations and communities in the region. Combining the already established top-down management strategy with a bottom-up approach should help in addressing these challenges.

### Introduction

The Western Balkans, as well as other parts of Southeast Europe, are known for their rugged and mountainous terrain (Willis 1994). The mountains and complex topography have significantly influenced the region's development, forming strong local identities, some isolated and others influenced by external factors, resulting in a complex mosaic of languages (Joseph 2020), religions, and nations (Daskalov and Marinov 2013, Kitromilides 1996, Lika 2024). The Western Balkans is part of the Balkan Peninsula and includes the states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Although Croatia is geographically part of the Western Balkans and actively participates in regional environmental initiatives (Bartlett 2007, WWF 2014), its accession to the European Union (EU) in 2013 has led to its exclusion from the "Western Balkans" designation in political contexts, where the term now typically refers to the non-EU countries in the region (Kolstø 2016, Lika 2024). The region contains one of Europe's most valuable natural habitats, characterized by biological diversity, karst phenomena, wild lakes and rivers (Djordjevic 2014, Durham 2017, Fuerst-Bjeliš et al. 2024, Willis 1994). Aiming to

preserve these natural values, numerous areas have been designated as protected areas in different periods starting with the second half of the 19th century (Sladonja et al. 2012) and continuing till nowadays. Many of these areas have been designated with different protection statuses in line with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), directives of conservation and protection of areas (Melenhorst et al. 2013).

Protected areas play a significant role in conserving biodiversity, protecting natural and cultural heritage and mitigating the effects of climate change (Hamilton and McMillan 2004, Khan and Bhagwat 2010). On the one hand, a common argument for establishing protected areas is that, besides habitat and biodiversity conservation, they also provide economic and social benefits, contribute to the quality of life of the local population and preservation of traditional and cultural practices (Getzner et al. 2010, Lockwood et al. 2012, Mitrofanenko et al. 2015). On the other hand, some researchers suggest that the creation of protected areas brings more restrictions for local communities and might have a negative impact on their social and cultural well-being (Zhang et al. 2025). However, the trend of increasing protected areas has continued recently, being a result of efforts of many countries to expand existing protected areas, in order to match existing policies and preserve their natural and cultural heritage (IUCN 2024, Saura et al. 2019). For example, the EU, through the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, has set a target of designating 30% of its terrestrial and marine areas as protected in whatever form by 2030 (Cazzolla Gatti et al. 2023, European Commission 2020).

Western Balkan countries have expressed their commitment to membership of the EU, considering it as a right path for future development (Elbasani 2008, 2013). The progress of negotiations and the opening of accession chapters vary between countries. Based on the Stabilization and Association Agreement, which has been ratified by all Western Balkan countries, the adoption, implementation and enforcement of Chapter 27 of the EU acquis on Environment and Climate Change are mandatory for countries seeking EU membership. Therefore, all Western Balkans countries have stepped up their efforts in areas such as climate action, pollution control, energy transition, biodiversity conservation and the circular economy, while progress varying between individual states (Belis et al. 2022). These efforts have been supported by the EU through initiatives such as the Green Agenda Implementation Guidelines for the Western Balkans (SWD 2020).

According to the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the environmental protection agencies of the Western Balkans countries (Table 1), there were 1,630 protected areas in the region of various categories based on national or international classification in 2024 (EEA 2024). Which is the highest number in the history of the Western Balkans. These areas together cover approximately 21,975 km<sup>2</sup>, representing about 10.58% of the total area of about 208,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the Western Balkans (EEA 2024). The percentage of protected areas varies between countries, with some exceeding the average of Western Balkans countries and some falling below that average. For example, Albania has around 18.25% of its territory designated as protected areas,

while Bosnia and Herzegovina has the lowest percentage, around 4.4% (EEA 2024). Despite considerable expansion of protected areas in recent decades, the percentage remains below the EU average and below the EU target mentioned above.

Name of Country	Country area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Quantity of protected areas	Area covered by protected areas (km <sup>2</sup> )	Share of protected areas (%)
Albania	28,758	798	5,247	18.25
Bosnia and Herzegovina	51,234	48	2,253	4.40
Kosovo	10,904	256	1,413	12.96
Montenegro	13,885	57	1,896	13.66
North Macedonia	25,430	75	3,526	13.86
Serbia	77,466	396	7,640	9.86
<b>Western Balkans</b>	<b>207,677</b>	<b>1,630</b>	<b>21,974</b>	<b>10.58</b>

Table 1. Total extent of protected areas in the Western Balkans as in 2024 (EEA 2024)

1. táblázat. A nyugat-balkáni védett területek teljes kiterjedése 2024-ben (EEA 2024)

This research study aims to provide a general overview of the state of protected areas in the region of the Western Balkans, particularly national parks as the most representative category of protected areas. National parks represent the largest area covered by protected areas in the region and are also often recognized as the most valuable landscapes due to the large area they occupy, their ecological values, and economic potential (Doli 2024, EEA 2024, Runte 1997). The main objectives of national parks are to protect biodiversity, including its ecological structure and supporting environmental processes, and to promote education and recreation (Ferretti-Gallon et al. 2021, IUCN 2024). The study is based on an analysis of the secondary sources related to protected areas in the Western Balkans, discussing the history and aim of their creation, cross-border cooperation and current challenges of their management. In total, data for 31 national parks have been analyzed (Table 2). Many of these national parks are in mountainous areas close to national borders, offering opportunities for cross-border cooperation (Doli 2024, Vasiljević and Pezold 2011). This cooperation may not only be interpreted as necessary to fulfil the goals of nature conservation, but also as a possibility to foster ties between countries and communities with a complex history, while at the same time aligning with their aspirations to join the EU. National parks in Western Balkans are important areas for biodiversity conservation and represent key areas for regional collaborations and shared environmental governance in the future. Beside their numerous functions they may contribute to the development of the area economically by using the touristic potential (Doli et al. 2024, Melenhorst et al. 2013), offering visitors a wild nature and unique experience (Fuerst-Bjeliš et al. 2024, Willis and Garrod 1993), which can rarely be found in other European regions affected by human activities or over-management (Plieninger et al. 2016).

No	Country	Site Name	Site Area (ha)	Foundation Year
1	Albania	Alpet Shqiptare*	82,845	2022
2	Albania	Bredhit të Hotovës-Dangëlli	36,004	2008
3	Albania	Shebenik	34,508	2008
4	Albania	Mali i Dajtit	28,562	2006
5	Albania	Prespë	27,613	1999
6	Albania	Mali i Tomorrit	27,159	2012
7	Albania	Divjake-Karavasta	22,389	2007
8	Albania	Lurë-Mali i Dejës	19,288	2018
9	Albania	Lumi Vjosa	12,727	2023
10	Albania	Karaburun-Sazan (Marine NP)	12,437	2010
11	Albania	Butrinti	8,622	2013
12	Albania	Llogara	1,769	1966
13	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sutjeska	16,052	1962
14	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kozara	3,908	1967
15	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Una	36,629	2008
16	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Drina	6,316	2017
17	Kosovo	Parku Kombëtar Sharri	53,469	2012
18	Kosovo	Parku Kombëtar Bjeshkët e Nemuna	62,488	2012
19	Montenegro	Nacionalni park Lovcen	6,220	1952
20	Montenegro	Nacionalni park Biogradska gora	5,650	1952
21	Montenegro	Nacionalni park Durmitor	32,519	1952
22	Montenegro	Nacionalni park Skadarsko jezero	40,000	1983
23	Montenegro	Nacionalni park Prokletije	16,038	2012
24	North Macedonia	Pelister	17,140	1948
25	North Macedonia	Mavrovo	73,410	1949
26	North Macedonia	Galichica	24,320	1958
27	North Macedonia	Sar Mountain	62,705	2021
28	Serbia	Nacionalni park Djerdap	63,786	1974
29	Serbia	Nacionalni park Kopaonik	11,969	1981
30	Serbia	Nacionalni park Tara	24,992	1981
31	Serbia	Nacionalni park Kučaj-Beljanica	22,805	2023

*Table 2.* National parks in the Western Balkans as of 2024. Source: European Environment Agency database and state agencies of protected areas. \* The former National Parks of Valbona Valley and Theth, the Gashi River Strict Nature Reserve, and the Kelmendi region were merged to form the Albanian Alps National Park (Alpet Shqiptare)

*2. táblázat.* Nemzeti parkok a Nyugat-Balkánon 2024-ben. Forrás: Európai Környezetvédelmi Ügynökség adatbázisa és a védett területek állami ügynökségei. \* Az egykori Valbona-völgy és Theth Nemzeti Parkokat, a Gashi folyó Természetvédelmi Területét és a Kelmendi régiót egyesítették, így létrejött az Albán Alpok Nemzeti Park (Alpet Shqiptare)

## Region of Western Balkans

The Western Balkans (Figure 1) has a diverse terrain, including the Adriatic coast and Dinaric Arc Mountain range in the west, the southern extension of the Carpathian

Mountain range and Balkan Mountain range in the east and Pindus mountains in the south. In the inland it also includes the southern part of the Pannonian Plain and several smaller plains and the Sharr-Korab Massif. The region is characterized by a diverse climate, which includes Mediterranean conditions with mild-wet winters and warm-dry summers in the coastal and lowland areas, transitioning to a moderately continental and mountainous climate in the higher and northern areas. The diverse topography, including the coastline, high mountains and plains, reflects the geomorphological characteristics of the Western Balkans (Belis et al. 2022, Djordjevic 2014).

The Dinaric Mountain range, also known in the literature as the Dinaric Arc or Dinaric Alps, extends for about 650 km along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea from the Soča River in western Slovenia on the North through, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo to the Drin River, in northern Albania on the South (Zupan Hajna 2012). However, various researchers have different opinions regarding the extent of the Dinaric mountain ranges (Gams 1969, Stevanovic' et al. 2016). The name originates from Mount Dinara, which is located on the border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The highest peak is Jezerca (2,694 m) in the Albanian Alps. The rugged mountains, composed of limestone and dolomite, are a natural barrier to access from the Adriatic coast to the interior of the Balkan Peninsula, which also affects the ecological and local climatic diversity of the area. Karst phenomena are very present and active in the area and have led to the formation of unique landscape features, such as rivers, lakes, sinkholes, caves and karst springs, which dominate the landscape of this area (Schneider-Jacoby et al. 2006, Djordjevic 2014, Fuerst-Bjeliš et al. 2024).

The landscape dominated by forests and pastures with limited agricultural productivity, as well as the difficult living conditions with harsh winters, have prevented the spread of permanent human settlements in high mountains, making the Dinaric Mountain regions less populated compared to the lowlands of the Western Balkans, where most industrial areas are located (Mickovic et al. 2020). Most of its agricultural landscapes were managed for pastoral practices through transhumance, a tradition that was spread throughout the region. Villagers migrate their livestock from the valleys to the mountains from late May to October. Seasonal mountain settlements, known as *katun* or *stane*, have been established by shepherds and their families to stay temporarily in the mountains during the summer season (Fuerst-Bjeliš et al. 2024). This constellation of conditions has influenced the creation of a unique culture and identity of the area, such as social organization, vernacular housing construction, clothing, customs and traditions (Durham 2017, Joseph 2020, Kitromilides 1996). Nowadays, promotion of these values has made the region more well-known to the public, which has led to an increase in mountain and cultural tourism (Doli et al. 2024, Melenhorst et al. 2013).

## Historical context of protected areas

The Western Balkan countries have undergone geopolitical transformations over time, which have been reflected in approaches to nature conservation and the establishment of protected areas. Five phases in the development of protected areas in the Western Balkans may be distinguished, which are also in line with the major political events that occurred in the region during the second half of the 20th century. The map (Figure 1) shows the protected areas of the Western Balkans, represented based on the period when they were established. The first phase includes early initiatives that occurred before World War II. This period was characterized by numerous wars, including the First Balkan War (1912–1913), the Second Balkan War (1913), the First World War (1914–1918), and the Second World War (1939–1945), which left little room for initiatives aimed at protecting nature during this time (Daskalov and Marinov 2013). Data from this period is not presented on the map due to the small and fragmented surface area of protected areas, making visual presentation impractical. The second phase extends from the period after World War II to the end of the 1960s. This period was characterized by the consolidation of communist systems and industrialization. The third phase, lasting from the 1970s to the late 1980s, was characterized by economic stagnation in both Albania due to isolation, and Yugoslavia due to external debt and inflation. The fourth phase extends from the 1990s to the beginning of the millennium and converges with the fall of the communist regime in Albania and the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The fifth phase covers the period from the 2000s to the present day and is represented by a substantial growth in the number and size of protected areas.

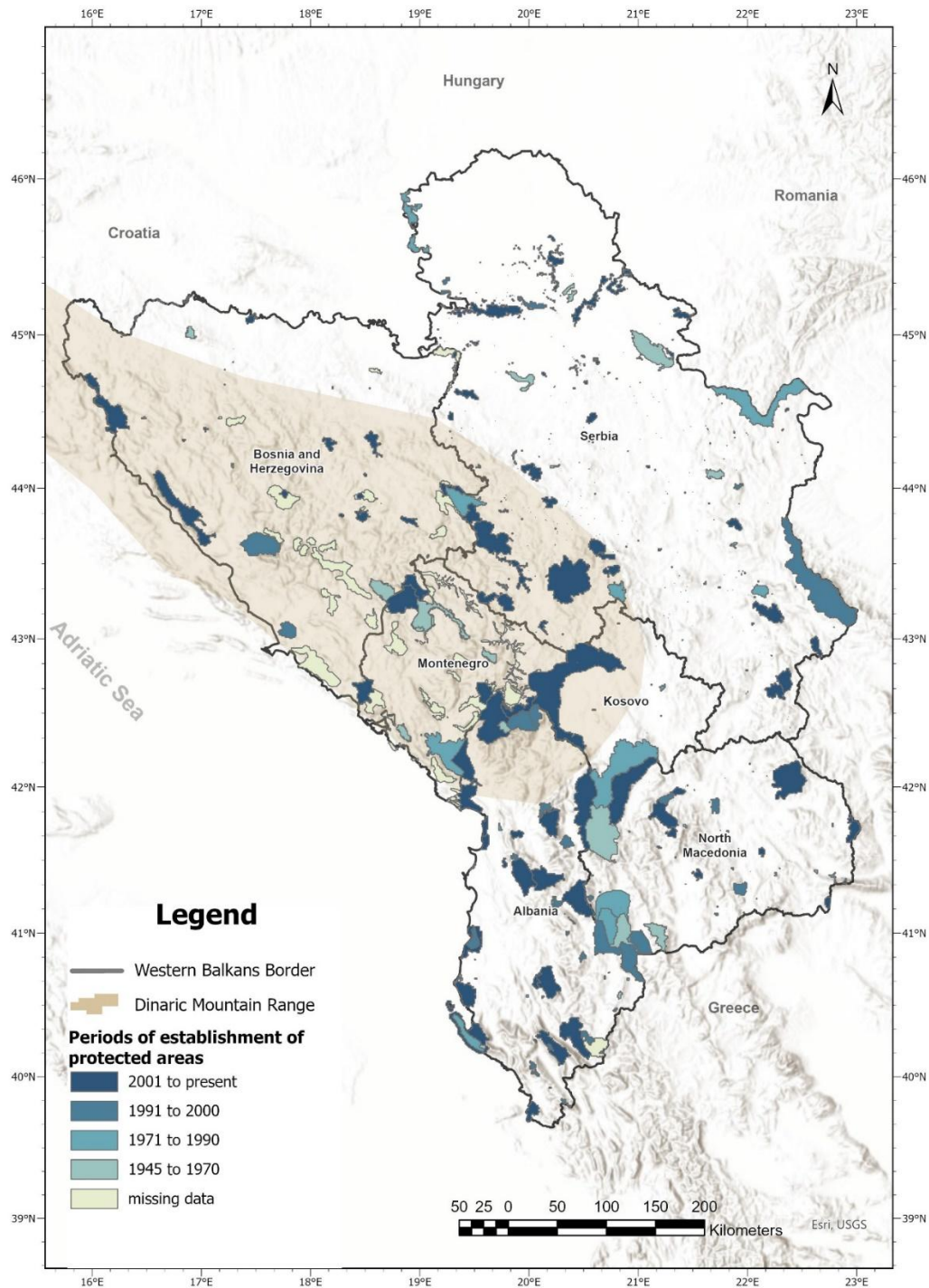


Figure 1. Protected areas in the Western Balkans by the year of establishment. Note: missing data refers to all those areas that do not have a year of establishment in the database. Only natural monuments (IUCN category III) that have a surface (polygon) are shown on the map. Natural monuments that do not have a surface (point) are not shown on the map. Source: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2025)

1. ábra. Védett területek a Nyugat-Balkánon a létesítés éve szerint. Megjegyzés: a hiányzó adatok mindazon területekre vonatkoznak, amelyek alapítási éve nem szerepel az adatbázisban. A térképen csak azok a természeti emlékek (IUCN III. kategória) jelennek meg, amelyek felülettel (sokszöggel) rendelkeznek. A felülettel (ponttal) nem rendelkező természeti emlékek nem jelennek meg a térképen. Forrás: UNEP-WCMC és IUCN (2025).

Initial efforts at nature conservation emerged in the second half of the 19th century in the northern part of the Western Balkans that was under the jurisdiction of the Habsburg Monarchy, while in the south of the Sava-Danube line that was under the Ottoman jurisdiction, nothing was attempted (Singleton 1987). Protection was limited and focused mainly on small areas belonging to royal families, serving as recreational and hunting areas. The protection goals were primarily for the scenic landscape values and cultural heritage of the royal families. The first protected area designated in the region was Obedska Bara, proclaimed in 1874 in present-day Serbia, primarily as part of efforts to preserve royal hunting areas (Mari et al. 2022). In Croatia were established institutional and legal frameworks for nature protection, including the establishment of the Croatian Nature Society in 1885 and the adoption of Laws on Bird Protection in 1893, Law on Hunting in 1893 and Law on Underground Protection in 1900 (Sladonja et al. 2012). In Montenegro, the establishment of protected areas began in 1878 under the initiative of Prince Nikola. Biogradska Gora was the first protected area in the Principality of Montenegro (Vugdelic and Drobnjak 2014). Meanwhile, other initiatives for nature protection continued between the two world wars, inspired from the designation of the first national park Triglav Lake in Slovenia, which was initially established as an Alpine Conservation Park in 1924.

After the end of World War II, Western Balkans countries, at that time consisting of the Albania and Yugoslav Federation, were ruled by communist governments. Albania employed a centralized system of governance, influenced by its close relations with the Soviet Union, which extended also to nature protection and the management of protected areas through a top-down approach, controlled by the state (Carter and Turnock 2002). Yugoslavia implemented a decentralized system, where federal and republican-level assemblies were authorized to adopt specific laws for the creation and regulation of protected areas, supported by professional institutes that had been initially established, while day-to-day administration was carried out by self-managing bodies representing local authorities and various interest groups (Singleton 1987). Between 1945 and 1970, the establishment of protected areas expanded throughout the region (Figure 1). In addition to their primary role in conservation, some protected areas have also been designated to commemorate important historical events. For example, Lovcen National Park was established on the land surrounding the mausoleum of Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, while Sutjeska National Park in Bosnia and Herzegovina was established to honour the heroes of the battle that took place in that area in 1943 (Singleton 1987). In Macedonia, the designation of national parks began with the establishment of Pelister in 1948 and Mavrovo in 1949 (Kolchakovski et al. 2019). In Croatia, Plitvice Lakes and Paklenica were designated as national parks in 1949. In Serbia, the first protected area was Carska Bara in 1955, followed by the designation of Fruška Gora as national park in 1960 (Mari et al. 2022). In Montenegro, Biogradska Gora, which had been declared a protected area since 1878, was officially designated as a national park in 1952, along with Durmitor and Lovćen (Vugdelic and Drobnjak 2014). In Kosovo, nature protection efforts during this period included the designation of the first protected



areas, such as Kozhnjeri (1955), Rusenica (1955), and Gubavci (1959). Sharr National Park was established in 1986, later than in other countries at that time, becoming the first national park in the country. Initially, it covered an area of 39,000 hectares. Later, with the introduction of new legislation in 2012, the protected area was expanded to 53,500 hectares (Veselaj and Mustafa 2015). In Albania, efforts to protect the environment were developing slower. The first national parks, Lura National Park, Dajti National Park and Thethi National Park were designated only in 1966, aimed to protect the glacial lakes, old forests, diverse flora and fauna and local traditions (Kromidha et al. 2020).

From the late 1970s to the 1990s, there was a positive but limited trend in the expansion of protected areas in the region. During this period, the focus of the countries was on economic development, which led to the extensive exploitation of natural resources (Singleton 1987). Nature protection institutions prioritized expanding knowledge about the functions of protected areas and ratifying international conventions for nature conservation during this time. During this period, Albania was in complete isolation, starting with the breakdown of relations with the Soviet Union and later with China. This isolation led to significant economic instability, forcing the communist government to concentrate its priorities on essential economic sectors while largely neglecting nature conservation efforts.

With the fall of the communist regimes and after the end of the conflicts in the late 1990s, the Western Balkans countries faced a new paradigm of the democratic system which they had to adapt. During this transition Albania has increased the number of protected areas rapidly, while the other countries of the Western Balkans were involved in the conflicts that follow the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation (Bartlett 2007, Kromidha et al. 2020).

With the beginning of the new millennium began the consolidation of democratic states in the region as well, which went through a difficult process of institutional transformation. The legacy of centralized governance mixed with fragmented legal frameworks and limited financial resources further complicated the restructuring of public administration, which was also reflected in the management of protected areas. In this context, the management of protected areas moved from the top-down approach that had been practiced until then (Singleton 1987), to a combined approach where the interests of other actors had to be taken into account and the balancing of environmental conservation with the socio-economic needs of local communities started to be considered (Carter and Turnock 2002). The new approach required new ways of thinking, cross-border cooperation and inclusion. States that had operated under centralized systems for decades faced difficulties in adapting to these changes. These challenges were further complicated by the fact that ethnic tensions and divisions resulting from previous conflicts further affected cross-border cooperation and inclusion (Bartlett 2007). These divisions and barriers were gradually reduced by promoting cooperation in nature conservation and establishing new protected areas, a process which was also supported by various western organizations that started

regional initiatives such as the Big win for Dinaric Arc and the Balkan Peace Project (Djordjevic 2014, Walters 2015).

Given their political aspirations for membership in the European Union, the Western Balkans countries have worked to harmonize their environmental policies with EU policies and regulations. The countries revised and improved existing laws, implemented new acts and regulations on nature protection and protected areas. For example, Albania implemented Act No. 81/2017 on Protected Areas, later amended by Act No. 21/2024. Serbia's nature conservation system has been governed by the Act on Nature Conservation 2010, which outlines the protection of biological, geological, and landscape diversity (Banjac et al. 2019). Bosnia and Hercegovina adopted the Act on Nature Protection in 2004, which is harmonized with European Horizontal Legislation and focuses on integrated nature protection and implementing EU directives (Đug and Drešković 2012). Kosovo developed new Act on Nature Protection No. 2005/02-L18, supported by international experts and EU directives at that time, later updated by Act No. 2010/03-L-233, along with specific acts for the national parks "Bjeshkët e Nemuna" (No. 2011/04-L-086) and "Sharri" (No. 2011/04-L-087) (Veselaj and Mustafa 2015). These acts aim to align with key EU nature conservation directives, including the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and the Birds Directive (147/2009/EC), replacing previous laws and regulations in each country.

### **Cross-Border cooperation**

Mountains often form borderlands between regions or countries and have historically been sources of conflict over natural resources, transport corridors, and areas of cultural and linguistic marginalization (Bayes et al. 2019, Ingalls and Mansfield 2017). The Western Balkans is a region with a dominant mountainous terrain, and it is composed of small states that also have ethnic groups within them that are identified by origin, language or religion. This cultural diversity is an asset for the area, but in some cases, it also turns into a weakness and threat, since when respect and tolerance end and interests between different groups are diverging, feelings of identity and nationalism appear and conflicts can flare up very quickly, creating a chain effect in some cases. This approach with frequent increases and decreases in tensions hinders cross-border cooperation in general and translates into little cooperation in the field of nature protection and conservation (Walters 2015). Achieving conservation objectives requires not only establishing protected areas, but maintaining cooperation between communities, states and regions as well (Miho et al. 2023).

Following the end of conflicts in the Western Balkans, the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe was established in 1999, initiated by the European Union. This institution aimed to promote peace, democracy, human rights and economic growth in the region (Busek 2003, Elbasani 2008). In 2008, it was succeeded by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which adopted a more regionally focused approach, prioritizing the involvement of participating countries rather than external actors. These initiatives created a basis and a positive climate among member states for

cooperation in various fields, including regional development and environmental protection (Djordjevic 2014). Initial efforts were driven by international and local NGOs implementing cooperation projects at regional, state and community level. The main organizations involved in these projects were international organizations such as International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Regional Environment Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), Council of Europe, European Nature Heritage Fund (Euronatur) and European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC). Other actors are also the development agencies and organizations of several western countries such as German International Cooperation Society (GIZ), Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), French Facility for Global Environment (FFEM) and local NGO-s. The main goal of all stakeholders involved is to increase cooperation for the long-term preservation and sustainable development of the region (Belis et al. 2022, Djordjevic 2014, Doli 2024).

The first significant initiative at the regional level promoted by WWF and supported by other actors was the one in 2008 known as Big Win for Dinaric Arc. At that time, Slovenia, as a country holding the European Union Presidency, hosted the respective ministers of the six Dinaric Arc countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia), who signed an agreement to protect the natural heritage of the region through a network of protected areas. This cooperation resulted in the creation and expansion of several protected areas, including the transboundary Shebenik National Park (2008) along the borders between Albania and Macedonia, Sazan Karaburun Marine National Park (2010) in Albania and Prokletije National Park in Montenegro (Figure 1 and 2). Croatia created 14 new protected areas and Bosnia and Herzegovina established Una National Park. Based on the data collected for the entire area of the ecoregion of the Dinaric Arc, several analyses and reports have been published (Stubbs and Solioz 2012, WWF 2014).

Following the first agreement, a second meeting, Big Win II, was held in Montenegro in 2013, where representatives agreed to continue regional cooperation on environmental protection in the Dinaric Arc region. The agreement also included the remaining two Western Balkans countries, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Representatives from eight countries adopted a joint declaration outlining shared priorities for improving biodiversity data, stakeholder engagement, transboundary cooperation, and the management of protected areas and Natura 2000 networks. These agreements provided opportunities for other regional and local initiatives such as the Dinarides Parks network, established in 2014, which consists of a network of 100 protected areas in the Western Balkans (The Parks Dinarides network 2014). Individual countries also began to establish transboundary protected areas as the Alpet Shqiptare – Bjeshket e Nemuna – Prokletije between Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro; Dinara Mountain between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina;

Durmitor–Sutjeska between Montenegro and Bosnia and Hercegovina; Tara NP – Drina River between Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina (WWF 2014).

Another agreement between Albania, North Macedonia and Greece initiated transboundary cooperation for the Prespa Lakes region in 2000, focusing on the sustainable use and conservation of resources. Three national NGOs, MES (North Macedonia), PPNEA (Albania) and SPP (Greece), formed Prespa Net, a network that aims to coordinate civil society efforts to protect the Prespa basin area. This cooperation agreement now has an international character and has been signed by all three countries (Anon 2022, Clarke et al. 2000).

The Balkan Peace Project, initiated in 2001 as a grassroots project from international and local NGOs, promoted environmental protection and regional tourism between Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro. Inspired by British author Mary Edith Durham, who crossed the area more than a hundred years ago (Durham 2017), the project aims to promote peace, protect biodiversity, and mitigate environmental threats through sustainable tourism, while fostering local employment (Hara 2009, Walters 2015). Today, this project involves local communities, businesses and experts, who collaborate mainly in the field of tourism. A network of hiking trails has been established that connects the three countries, becoming a source of income for many families in these remote mountainous areas (Abraham 2024).

### **Current state and management challenges of protected areas**

The challenges of protected area management in the Western Balkans can be categorized into two main groups: general challenges faced by all countries and specific challenges that appear in individual countries or among a group of countries. From the general challenges are identified 4 major challenges have been identified, which are connected to each other. Political instability, emigration, corruption and lack of funding are identified as the major obstacles to the development of protected areas.

Political instability often leads to economic instability (Jannils 2021), which is evident in the Western Balkans. In certain contexts, politicians use nationalism as a tool for political promotion and to advance specific agendas that may be detrimental to regional stability (Metodieva 2022). This approach often manifests itself as isolationist and divisive rhetoric, which is at odds with the collaborative and inclusive rhetoric needed for effective environmental management. Limited trust between countries leads to the situation that states cannot discuss properly with each other and the involvement of external mediators to facilitate cross-border cooperation is required (Jureković and Mandalenakis 2019). In the last decade, this approach has changed and experts on the region are willing to collaborate and discuss issues related to protected areas (Clarke et al. 2000, Gabioud 2012).

The declining population is one of the main challenges in the region, as it is directly related to economic development. Migration is closely linked to political and economic instability. This phenomenon has resulted in depopulation of rural areas, as residents migrate to urban areas or seek opportunities in more developed countries (Jureković

and Mandalenakis 2019). Although there is no evidence to prove migration is related to the establishment of protected areas, in some cases, the expansion of protected areas, accompanied by legal restrictions, has limited the use of land and natural resources for local communities. Emigration might affect negatively the sustainable economic development of a protected area and encourage illegal exploitation of resources.

Corruption is another challenge that negatively impacts socio-economic development in the Western Balkans (Alfirević et al. 2024). This challenge might also be in environmental protection, where allocated funds are often mismanaged and used inappropriately. Insufficient funding stems not only from corruption and mismanagement, but also from government priorities that often favor sectors that are considered more important than environmental protection and management of a protected area.

The specific challenges faced by the Western Balkans in managing protected areas relate to the quality of the legal framework, the effectiveness of their implementation (Belis et al. 2022, Miho et al. 2023), the development of professional capacities (Đug and Drešković 2012, Veselaj and Mustafa 2015), the pressures of mass tourism and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, including rivers, minerals and forests (Belis et al. 2022, Puecker and Steger 2023, Schwarz and Vienna 2015).

Some countries in the region are more successful in overcoming the mentioned barriers. In terms of legal approximation with the EU directives and the implementation of management plans for protected areas, Montenegro has positive progress within the region. However, challenges persist, particularly in relation to the regulation of tourism within protected areas (Bulatović and Rajović 2018, Vugdelic and Drobnjak 2014).

The spatial distribution of protected areas within the Western Balkans region is also uneven, which reflects differences in the development of nature and environment protection policies in individual countries of the region. As is shown on the map (Figure 2), during the last two decades, the number and size of the protected areas have increased significantly in all IUCN categories (Belis et al. 2022, Kromidha et al. 2020, Veselaj and Mustafa 2015), but the amount remains lower compared to the EU average (EEA 2024).

For example, Albania has the highest percentage of protected areas compared to other Western Balkans countries (see Table 1 and 3). These developments are in line with Albania's broader efforts to align its environmental legislation with EU standards, as part of its ambitions for full membership. Recently, many decisions have been taken by state authorities regarding protected areas, in some cases increasing the size of protected areas, changing their categorization or designating new protected areas. The Valbona Valley and Theth national parks, as well as the strictly protected reserve Gashi River, have been merged into a national park entitled "Albanian Alps" (VKM nr 59).

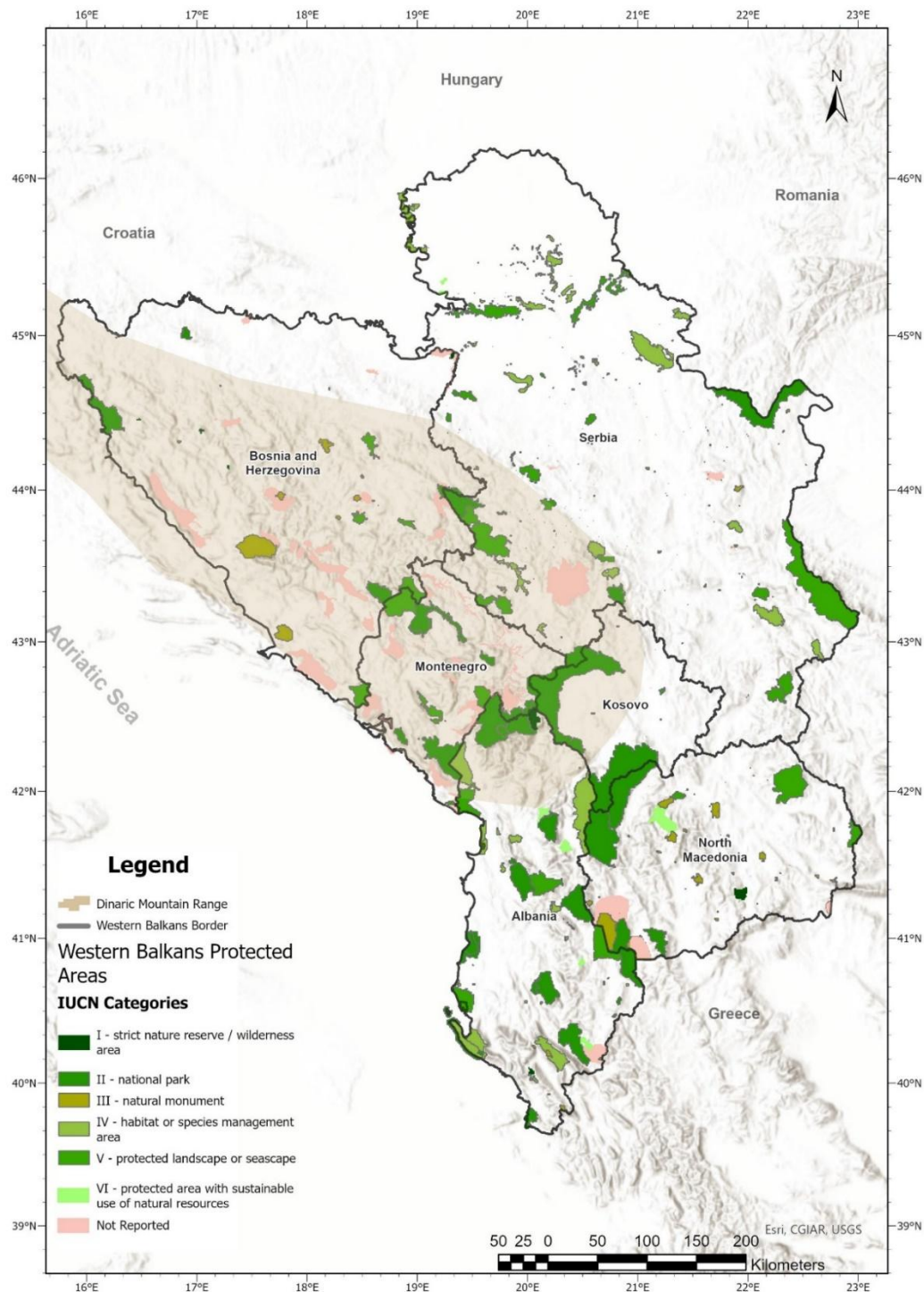


Figure 2. Protected areas in the Western Balkans by IUCN categories. Note: Not reported refers to all the protected areas that are not included in one of the IUCN categories. Only natural monuments (IUCN category III) that have a surface (polygon) are shown on the map. Natural monuments that do not have a surface (point) are not shown on the map. Source: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2025).

Ábra 2. Védett területek a Nyugat-Balkánon az IUCN kategóriái szerint. Megjegyzés: A „nem jelentett” azokra a védett területekre vonatkozik, amelyek nem tartoznak egyik IUCN kategóriába sem. A térképen csak azok a természeti emlékek (IUCN III. kategória) jelennek meg, amelyek területtel (poligonnal) rendelkeznek. Azok a természeti emlékek, amelyek nem rendelkeznek területtel (pontként szerepelnek), nem jelennek meg a térképen. Forrás: UNEP-WCMC és IUCN (2025).

However, there is a lack of information on how effectively these protected areas are managed. Despite the legislative improvements, practical implementation remains difficult (Miho et al. 2023). The planned development of hydropower plants within protected areas such as the Vjosa River Basin, the Valbona Valley National Park and the Osumi Canyons – known as some of the last wild river ecosystems in Europe (Georgiadis 2022) – has faced opposition from local communities and environmental organizations (Bekteshi and Misho n.d., Georgiadis 2022, PPNEA 2021). These projects conflict with national legislation on protected areas as well as Albania's international conservation commitments. In response to sustained public outcry and advocacy efforts, some of these projects have been stopped and some of them have been finished. The pressure from environmental experts and activists has influenced the Albanian government's decision to designate the Vjosa River as a national park in 2023 (Miho et al. 2023). Other projects that raise discussions are the construction of Vlora Airport within the Vjosa-Nartë Protected Landscape and a proposed elite tourist resort on Sazan Island, which is part of the Karaburun-Sazan National Marine Park. Local communities express mixed views regarding the potential benefits and consequences of these developments discussed on the local media, while environmental experts and activists warn that these projects could have negative ecological, historical and archaeological consequences, threatening the biodiversity, habitat integrity and landscape mosaic of the protected areas (Georgiadis 2022, Shkurti 2019).

Another example of the state that has taken inspiration from Western European conservation policies is the newest state in the Western Balkans, Kosovo, which has undertaken reforms to harmonize its nature protection policies with EU directives. Establishment of the national park Bjeshket e Nemuna and the expansion of the area of the Sharr national park have increased the proportion of protected areas up to 13% of the country's territory, but the process of establishing professional capacities needed for management of the protected areas is still not consolidated (Veselaj and Mustafa 2015). Membership in international nature conservation organizations and access to their programs and funds remain challenging, as Kosovo is not yet a member of the United Nations. As a result, the progress in conservation efforts and the expansion of protected area networks remains difficult. Management of protected areas also faces challenges connected with harmonizing the interests of various stakeholders and the lack of respect for effective legislation by local developers. Unauthorized construction within protected areas to fulfil the needs for touristic accommodation and second housing is a current threat that requires discussion and a solution in the near future (Doli 2024).

On the other end of the spectrum is Bosnia and Herzegovina which has the lowest number as well as extent of protected areas in the Western Balkans (Table 1 and 3) based on literature and the European Environmental Agency dataset (Đug and Drešković 2012, EEA 2024). Challenges in conservation management are compounded by limited professional capacity-building and institutional cooperation, particularly between the country's different administrative and ethnic entities. These governance

issues are reflected in the slow progress of nature protection policies and the implementation of conservation measures (Đug and Drešković 2012).

<b>Albania</b>				<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>			
<b>IUCN Category</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>	<b>IUCN Category</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>
Ia, Ib	3	9,500	1.8	Ia, Ib	2	593	0.3
II	12	239,993	45.7	II	4	62,904	27.9
III	748	3,920	0.7	III	23	53,403	23.7
IV	26	153,239	29.2	IV	3	1,160	0.5
V	5	99,816	19.0	V	11	57,792	25.7
VI	4	18,245	3.5	VI	3	66	0.0
Not reported				Not reported	2	49,368	21.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>798</b>	<b>524,714</b>		<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>225,287</b>	
<b>Kosovo</b>				<b>Montenegro</b>			
<b>IUCN Category</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>	<b>IUCN Category</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>
Ia, Ib	19	10,883	7.5	Ia, Ib	1	228	0.1
II	2	115,957	82.1	II	5	100,427	52.9
III	226	6,068	4.3	III	40	4,651	2.5
IV	0	0	0.0	IV	3	4,761	2.5
V	9	8,362	5.9	V	8	79,770	42.0
VI	0	0	0.0	VI	0	0	0.0
Not reported				Not reported			
<b>Total</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>141,270</b>		<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>189,838</b>	
<b>North Macedonia</b>				<b>Serbia</b>			
<b>IUCN Category</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>	<b>IUCN Category</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>
Ia, Ib	2	7,787	2.2	Ia, Ib	11	200	0.0
II	4	177,575	50.4	II	4	123,552	16.2
III	52	74,495	21.1	III	195	5,614	0.7
IV	12	3,045	0.9	IV	44	178,523	23.4
V	4	64,356	18.3	V	36	359,260	47.0
VI	1	25,305	7.2	VI	1	2,955	0.4
Not reported				Not reported	105	93,905	12.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>352,563</b>		<b>Total</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>764,009</b>	

*Table 3.* Protected areas in the six Western Balkans countries by IUCN categories, quantity and coverage. Note: Ia, Ib = strict nature reserve/wilderness area; II = national park; III = natural monument; IV = habitat or species management area; V = protected landscape or seascape; VI = protected area with sustainable use of natural resources. Not reported refers to all the protected areas that are not included in one of the IUCN categories. Source: European Environment Agency database.

3. táblázat. Védett területek a hat nyugat-balkáni országban IUCN kategóriák, mennyiség és kiterjedés szerint. Megjegyzés: Ia, Ib = fokozottan védett természeti rezervátum/vadon terület; II = nemzeti park; III = természeti emlék; IV = élőhely- vagy fajkezelési terület; V = védett táj vagy tengeri táj; VI = védett terület a természeti erőforrások fenntartható használatával. A nem jelentett kifejezés minden olyan védett területre vonatkozik, amely nem szerepel az IUCN egyik kategóriájában sem. Forrás: Európai Környezetvédelmi Ügynökség adatbázisa.



Waste management is another challenge in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other neighboring countries. Drina River is significantly affected by pollution caused by the unregulated disposal of waste and untreated wastewater containing hazardous materials from communities, industries and agricultural activities, which threaten the area's ecosystems (Obradovic and Vulevic 2023).

North Macedonia and Serbia, although they have made some progress in managing protected areas, have experienced several challenges related to legislation and management, as well as a lack of funds and staff. Another challenge is the construction of hydroelectric power plants in protected areas such as Mavrovo National Park in Macedonia and Djerdap National Park in Serbia, which has led to protests and concerns about the environmental threats that may arise from these projects (Banjac et al. 2019, Kolchakovski et al. 2019, Schwarz and Vienna 2015).

While facing numerous management challenges that require solutions, the protected areas of the Western Balkans also represent some of the most beautiful and ecologically valuable areas, rich in natural and cultural heritage. To better appreciate the importance of these protected areas and the different roles they play, it is necessary to carry out comprehensive studies in ecology, sustainable development and heritage conservation.

## **Conclusion**

This overview serves as a basis for understanding the development of protected areas in the Western Balkans, bringing together some of the key facts and events that shaped conservation efforts in the area. Five phases of development of protected areas in the region were identified, and the challenges of managing these protected areas were addressed.

First documented initiatives of nature conservation in the Western Balkans date back to the end of the 19th century, when the first protected areas and legal frameworks were established. At the time, the focus was aimed on preservation of the aesthetic and recreational values of the local landscapes rather than on the systematic protection of biodiversity. The expansion of protected areas increased after World War II under the centralized communist governments, which initially gave importance to building professional capacities, legal frameworks and the establishment of protected areas. Despite the progress, economic development, which was followed by industrial development, often took precedence over conservation, limiting the effectiveness of protected area management. The post-communist transition period and the conflicts of the 1990s significantly affected conservation efforts. The transition to democratic governance presented new challenges. To address and provide solutions for the future management challenges of protected areas in the Western Balkans countries, the decades-old top-down management approach should be complemented with a new bottom-up approach, which would also involve local communities.

In a region where countries were emerging from a long-standing conflict, transboundary cooperation in nature conservation has been seen as a long-term tool to promote peace between countries and nations. The creation of initiatives from the European Union and Western NGOs, which was accompanied by local initiatives resulting in establishing transboundary protected areas, demonstrates the growing commitment to regional cooperation. The development of transboundary protected areas, such as Balkan Peace Park, Prespa Lakes initiatives, Durmitor–Sutjeska and Tara–Drina River shows the potential for enhanced regional collaboration and integration in the field of environmental conservation. However, institutional and political obstacles, as well as ethnic divisions in a fragmented region, continue to challenge cross-border cooperation, which requires more specific studies to determine the causes of tensions and provide comprehensive insight into the current situation.

Several common challenges have been identified in the region that slow the progress in protected area management, including political instability, migration, corruption and insufficient funding. The effectiveness of nature conservation efforts varies across countries, with some having made significant steps towards alignment with European Union environmental policies. However, more information is needed to clarify how effectively individual protected areas are managed. Issues such as the lack of an adequate legal framework, development of professional capacities, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources and tourism pressures are challenges that need to be discussed, analyzed and solved.

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## Védett területek fejlesztése a Nyugat-Balkánon

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**Kulcsszavak:** Dinári-hegység, helyi fejlesztés, határon átnyúló együttműködés, védett természeti területek

**Összefoglalás:** A nyugat-balkáni védett területek saját kihívásaikkal néznek szembe, amelyek az idők során a régió politikai és társadalmi-kulturális fejlődésével összhangban változtak. A 19. században kezdődtek a védelmi törekvések, amelyek a jelentős esztétikai vagy kulturális értékkel bíró tájképeket képviselő kis területek védelmét tűzték ki célul. A 20. század folyamán a természettudományos ismeretek gyarapodásával a védelem célja ökológiai szemléletté alakult át. Napjainkban a fenntarthatóság fenntartása a leggyakrabban megfogalmazott cél a Dinári-hegység védett területeivel kapcsolatban. A védett területek száma és mérete viszonylag szerény volt, de az elmúlt évtizedekben fokozatosan növekedett. Korábban a hatóságok előtt álló fő kihívások a védett területek kezeléséért felelős intézmények létrehozása, működésük jogi kereteinek kialakítása és maguk a védett területek létrehozása voltak. Napjainkban a védett területek számának növekedése új kihívások elé állítja a nyugat-balkáni országokat és azok közigazgatását. A védett területek szerepe a fejlesztések révén átalakul és újraértelmeződik a nemzeti politikákban, valamint a helyi gazdasági tevékenységekben, amelyek hatással vannak a helyi közösségek fenntartható gazdálkodására és működésére. E kihívások kezelése holisztikusabb megközelítést igényel, amely átlépi a régió nemzeti és közösségi közötti kulturális és politikai határokat. A már kialakított felülről lefelé irányuló irányítási stratégia és az alulról felfelé építkező megközelítés kombinálása segíteni fog e kihívások kezelésében.

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