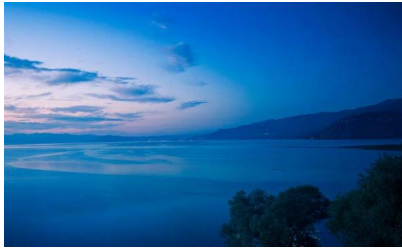


NEW UNESCO BIOSPHERE PLANNED FOR THE BALKAN NATIONS



There is a new tourist destination being planned for Eastern Europe that aims to transform the area's natural beauty into one, all-encompassing environmental region and improve sustainable tourism in the area. This reserve is a 4,000 square kilometre biosphere that will create new prospects for tourists while preserving the site with UNESCO protection.

Developing the parks and lakes of these Balkan nations into one, attractive tourist destination.

The objective of creating a cross-border region between Macedonia, Albania and Greece is ambitious but there is a lot of optimism regarding the finished project and the prospects for the region's tourism. Oliver Avramoski from the Galicica National Park - one of the proposed areas for protection - talks positively about the cooperation and communication between the three nations and the increased appeal of these areas thanks to increased tourist activities and chances to enjoy the cultural and natural heritage of the lands.

The development of this location, if handled correctly, could easily appeal to nature-loving tourists and those who may not have previously considered the area as a viable holiday destination. The parks and lakes under consideration are rich with flora and fauna, with an estimated 40 endemic species, and their appeal can only increase with adequate protection and UNESCO status.

The issue of creating a new tourist-friendly biosphere while respecting the environment and local culture.

The creation of this cross-border biosphere could cause some problems when it comes to the financial implications of such a destination and the idea of sustainable tourism, but the project is being handled in a way that is respectful to the environment and local population and there are few economic concerns. Arijan Meroli, the Albanian representative for the bilateral committee for the protection of Lake Ohrid - one of initial focuses of this campaign - even goes as far as saying that the UNESCO status will "guarantee that there won't be any problems in terms of economy in the region".

The biosphere is set to include Ohrid and Galicica as well as Macedonia's Pelister National Park and Lake Prespa in Greece and there will be measures in place to ensure their on-going protection that a Macedonian representative from the committee, Dejan Panovski, describes as "zones of strict protection", which include restrictions on urbanisation and tourist capacities. In addition to this, UNESCO is working closely with the 200,000 natives of this Balkan reserve to ensure the preservation of local culture as well as the environment and they are including local governments and non-government organisations in the process.

The start of an exciting new venture for Greece, Albania and Macedonia.

The application for this new destination is being submitted in December and requires the signatures of representatives from each of the three affected nations as a pledge of their commitment to the region's protection. Once these formalities are out the way and the cooperation of all parties is secured, work can start on turning the parks and lakes into UNESCO's biosphere. The optimism

surrounding this project cannot be denied, especially with Panovski's claim that it will be "one of the biggest tourist attractions in Europe", but it really does look set to become a sustainable and attractive tourist destination for many.

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