

## **The Balkans Peace Park Project**

### **Nomination for the BGTW Best Overseas Tourism Project 2007**

One of most stunningly beautiful areas of wilderness in Europe is the mountainous country around the area where the common borders of Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo converge. These are the Prokletije Mountains. To the south the land drops down to the Shala and Valbona valleys of Albania, while to the east it grades into the Rugovo district of Kosovo. It is a region that exemplifies the troubled histories of the south Balkan region, with debates about politics and ethnicity still only partially resolved. This is one of the remotest corners of Europe, one that hosts its own distinctive cultural landscapes. Indeed, it is the only place in southern Europe where a tribal socio-political organisation survived well into the last century. It is an area that historically has attracted English travellers (eg. Edward Lear, Edith Durham and Rebecca West), and it is an area that has enormous capacity – and, most importantly, the necessary will to host modern tourism of a variety that is, for Europe, utterly distinctive.

The notion of creating some sort of peace park in this tri-national region has been mooted for some years. But in November 2006, that idea began to evolve into reality with the initiative of representatives of local authorities in the area, backed by their national governments, to commit themselves to the development of a Balkans Peace Park<sup>1</sup>.

Peace parks are of course not new. The world's first such park was created on the borders of Sweden and Norway in 1914, and there have been many celebrated examples since – for example, astride the United States / Canada border there is Waterton Glacier International Peace Park.

The Balkans Peace Park combines an number of objectives in a single ambitious agenda. The initiative promotes ecologically sensitive tourism in a transboundary context – a chance for development in geographically peripheral areas in three of Europe's least advantaged countries. The project:

1. unites communities that have hitherto been divided by common borders;
2. it makes a stand against environmental degradation and promotes the effective protection of a region which has mountain landscapes and rural lifestyles which are not replicated elsewhere in Europe;
3. promotes access to the region for ethical and responsible tourism.

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the November 2006 declaration is attached. In the context of question of support for the project locally, it is useful to note the when the ambassador of the Republic of Albania to the UK, His Excellency Kastriot Robo, met with members of the British Guild of Travel Writers in May 2007, he highlighted the Balkans Peace Park Project as among the most exciting tourism development projects in his home country.

The project commands the support of civic and community leaders in the three countries concerned, as well as from a range of non-governmental organisations, including the United Nations Environment Programme. The project enjoy strong support in the United Kingdom, where it is promoted by a committee with charitable status. That UK link makes it peculiarly appropriate for the Balkans Peace Park to be nominated for an accolade from the UK.

The accompany map below shows the location of the Balkans Peace Park. A folder of supplementary material is attached; that elaborates on the points outlined in this nomination. High resolution images are available. Video footage can be provided on request.

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3 July 2007

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