



Innovative Practices in Biotourism
New Dimensions for Development in Prespa & Korçë

International Conference, 5-7 October 2013, Pyli Conference Center, Prespa, Greece

PRESS RELEASE

The partners of the European project on “Innovative Practices in Biotourism,” implemented within the framework of the IPA Greece–Albania 2007-2013 cross-border program, held an international conference to disseminate the results of the project and to promote a common biotourism product of added value incorporating the natural and cultural assets of the transboundary area of Prespa and Korçë. The event convened on 5-7 October 2013 at the Conference Center of Pyli in Prespa, and brought together local and regional stakeholders to discuss the development of the cross-border area through initiatives in biotourism.

Saturday, October 5, 2013

Opening Session and Cultural Exhibit

Speakers at the Opening Session included: Prof. **Agni Vlavianos Arvanitis**, President and Founder of the Biopolitics International Organisation and overall project coordinator; **Ioannis Peditotis**, General Consul of Greece in Korçë; **Dashnor Dervishi**, Ambassador of Albania to Greece; **Yiannis Kazoglou**, Representative of the Mayor of Prespa; **Yiannis Boutaris**, Mayor of Thessaloniki; **Efthimios Bakas**, Senior Executive Officer and f. General Secretary of Lifelong Learning at the Hellenic Ministry of Education; **Gabriela Scheiner**, Director of the Cultural Triangle of Prespa; and, Dr. **Panayotis Koliomichalis**, Director of the ENT Clinic at Hippocraton General Hospital.

Prof. **Vlavianos Arvanitis** began by discussing the importance of the project, which promotes the value of biotourism by strengthening transboundary cooperation for the protection of bios – life – the most precious gift on our planet. “Biotourism combines all the dimensions of environmental protection and economic development. If we consider building a society based on the joy of possessing bios, then we will immediately realize that we have a common responsibility to safeguard this gift for the future. Differentiation is the richness of our world. Differences in culture, language and tradition make up the wealth of humanity. Biotourism protects our natural and cultural resources and helps us to realize how interdependent we are with the environment and with each other.”

Mr. **Peditotis** expressed both appreciation for the project’s emphasis on the environment as a certifiable tourism product, as well as optimism about the potential of the project to enhance development in the cross-border area with very positive results for international cooperation. Mr. **Dervishi** congratulated the Biopolitics

International Organisation for its fortitude and for its initiative to bring together experts from tourism and the environmental field, as well as members of the local administration in an effort to strengthen cooperation in biotourism in the cross-border area. He also stressed that the Albanian government places great importance on environmental issues and on maintaining good relations with neighboring countries as a valuable investment for future generations.

Mr. **Boutaris** spoke about the highly significant work of the ARCTUROS Environmental Center in the region of Nymfaiio, as well as the importance of cooperation at the city and regional levels as a vehicle for strengthening cross-border relations. Mr. **Bakas** referred to the value of individual efforts in development projects and focused on the importance of establishing Balkan-wide cooperation for the comparative advantages of the area, while Mr. **Kazoglou** discussed biotourism as a way of promoting low-impact tourism activities.

Ms. **Scheiner** thanked all participants for their presence at the conference and noted that the ground has been laid for the local community to move closer to tourism and develop ongoing initiatives for cooperation, both locally and internationally.

In conclusion, Dr. **Koliomichalis** focused on the value of a common transborder culture, based on friendship and cooperation among peoples, and passed the floor to Prof. Vlavianos Arvanitis to announce the opening of the photo and document exhibition on the “Culture of Florina and Korçë.”

Sunday, October 6, 2013

Biotourism

Chair: Prof. **Agni Vlavianos Arvanitis**, President and Founder, Biopolitics International Organisation

Biotourism and local administration

Yiannis Kazoglou spoke on behalf of the Mayor of Prespa and underlined the importance of tourism for economic growth in Prespa, a region boasting unique natural and cultural assets. He also discussed the organisation of conferences and events in Prespa with the aim of promoting low-impact tourism, as well as the participation of the local administration in two Interreg European projects which have strengthened tourism activity in the area.

Yiannis Boutaris, Mayor of Thessaloniki, proceeded to analyze the concept of “city diplomacy” as a vehicle for the improvement of international relations and presented an example of a recent twinning project that the city of Thessaloniki realized with the city of Durrës in Albania. He also emphasized the importance of the participation of professionals in awareness raising initiatives that strengthen civil society. “The current crisis is global in nature. Prespa is an ideal region for trilateral cooperation, and positive messages such as the one emitted from the present conference can help us to face life with a different perspective.”

Life and its preservation

Athanasios Karameris, Professor of Forestry and Environmental Studies at the University of Thessaloniki, spoke about forests and ecotourism as essential elements of biotourism. He discussed the negative impacts of tourism on biodiversity and

highlighted the important social and economic functions of forests. By acknowledging the many opportunities for cooperation in biotourism in the cross-border area, as well as the unparalleled natural and cultural heritage of both countries, he underscored the global significance of biotourism as a common point of reference for international cooperation: respect for life and the promotion of natural and cultural wealth.

Dimitris Michailidis, agricultural journalist, emphasized that bios, the prefix of biotourism, implies balance, as opposed to imbalance which leads to the death of the host biosystem. Also, life and its regeneration presuppose long-term viability. Hybrid systems have limited viability and cannot support the propagation of life. A system can be successful only if all of its parts cooperate efficiently. Therefore, in order to ensure the preservation and continuation of life in Prespa, it is essential for all local stakeholders to cooperate in a balanced manner.

Kliti Kallamata, Architect and Director of the Past for Future Foundation in Albania, spoke about the impact of cultural heritage on the development of biotourism in the region of Korçë. His presentation was accompanied by a wealth of photographic material from the restoration of unique cultural and religious monuments from the wider Korçë area.

Thodoris Sdroulias, Journalist and Member of the European Healthy Cities Network, indicated that the local residents of Prespa, especially those involved in the agricultural, fishing, hotel and restaurant sectors, are the direct beneficiaries of biotourism. He also discussed the role of culture in biotourism and brought attention to the concept of “bio-culture” as a best practice which encompasses multiple initiatives for the protection of our planet.

Sotiris Vosdou, a Civil Engineer from the University of Thessaloniki, discussed aspects of economic development in Prespa and noted that agriculture and animal husbandry are the two basic areas of employment in the region, in combination with fishing. Concerning biotourism, it is essential to note that approximately 25 persons are currently employed in the tourism sector in Greek Prespa. In order to increase tourism influx, it is essential to promote the reasons for visiting Prespa, the options available, as well as the prospects for the development of biotourism.

Tourism and cross-border cooperation

Chairs: **Efthimios Bakas**, Senior Executive Officer and f. General Secretary of Lifelong Learning at the Hellenic Ministry of Education; and **Entela Pinguli**, Director, Biologists of Albania Organisation

Mr. **Bakas** commenced the session by noting that the Prespa lakes are a cornerstone for biotourism. He also suggested that in order for development efforts to be successful, they need to be organized in a larger context and be able to have international impact. “Why development through biotourism? Environmental assets are a valuable tourism product. The comparative advantage is a mosaic of many different elements that can support biotourism. There are plenty of ideas available. What we need is structure and cooperation at the base level. We need a change of mentality and greater civic initiative, as well as smart communication strategies where everyone will be involved in the creation of a cutting edge product.”

Ms. **Pinguli** presented the results of the project in Albania and the dissemination event which took place in Korçë for the signing of a cross-border Cooperation Agreement for Biotourism. She discussed the active engagement of local stakeholders, who have shown great interest in the project, and expressed her optimism regarding its long-term success. She also referred to the successful implementation of a local network for the promotion of biotourism, which has been created in the context of the project.

Biotourism and the local community

Vasilis Taktikos, Coordinator of the Civil Society Organisations Observatory, analyzed biotourism marketing strategies for the Prespa-Korçë cross-border region. He explained that tourism development in the area cannot be structured around large scale tour operators, but has to rely on social marketing strategies for three reasons: First, because the tourism market is too small to be industrialized. Second, because small businesses find it hard to undertake large advertising costs, and third because many of the small tourism entrepreneurs are also farmers, fishermen or animal raisers and regard tourism as a secondary source of income.

Eleftheria Stergiou, from the Pelekanos Bean Farmers' Cooperative, emphasized that the Prespa area is blessed with many local agricultural products that can be successfully marketed thanks to modern production methods and the cooperation of the local residents. This has resulted in better promotion as well as improvement of the products with the use of best farming practices and quality control mechanisms, such as the Integrated Quality Management System which is being implemented by the bean growers of Prespa since 2004.

Orjeta Gliozheni, from the Destination Management Organization of Albania, made a detailed presentation on the value of local cooperation in the development of biotourism. "A tourism destination's assets and resources can be shared by its inhabitants, visitors, public, and private sector interests. The local authorities have the delicate task of juggling private sector interests with local resident needs and wants, in order to maintain the economic health of the community and ensure that development is sustainable. The local community has to ensure the presence of a requisite mass of attractions, suitable accommodation, and adequate transportation to be able to satisfy tourists. The stakeholders within the tourism planning domain should be aware of the high degree of interdependence with each other and with the natural environment. Collaboration for tourism destination planning will depend on involving the key stakeholder groups: local government plus other public organizations having a direct bearing on resource allocation; tourism industry, associations and sectors."

Best practices

Nikos Molvalis, President of the Molyvos Tourism Association, presented best practices in sustainable tourism from the island of Mytilene. His contribution, which was highly appreciated by the audience, focused on examples of "non-artificial" tourism experiences based on the discovery of local culture and tradition, combined with a holistic appreciation of nature, beyond the conventional "sea and sun" model.

Arian Gjura, from the Guri i Zi community, emphasized on the importance of folk arts including weaving, drawing examples from the cross - border lake Shkodra in Albania. He referred to the promotion of handicrafts as a basis for Biotourism cooperation, underlining that such cooperation practices can lead to long-term

initiatives such as the creation of folk art museums and the organization of local fairs, festivals, markets plus other tourist attractions. He also mentioned to the renowned value of local products capable of stimulating regional economies.

Arjan Meroli of the General Secretariat of Lakes Prespa and Ohrid also raised relevant matters. Using examples from the Ohrid Lake he stressed the need to promote cost-effective solutions for the management of transboundary natural resources and issues of environmental pollution. Such solutions can act as vehicles for sustainable lake development, notably vis-à-vis Biotourism. They should be primarily based on the formation of private and public partnerships, the creation of new employment opportunities for restricting immigration patterns and the awareness raising of local residents.

Prespa–Korçë cross-border tourism product Market promotion and entrepreneurship

Tasos Gousios, Founder of Alpha Marketing and Communications S.A., discussed different ways of promoting the region of Prespa as an active tourism destination. His suggestions included: market research and analysis (foreign Embassies and Consulates, local administration, professional tourism associations, tourism businesses), directions for the promotion of tourism (local businesses, local stakeholders, participation in fairs and expos), promotion to travel agencies and tour operators, promotion to the general public through the mass media, the social media and through opinion-formers.

Stephanos Hatzimanolis, Director of SilverStar Holidays, addressed the concept of mass tourism and noted that it needs to focus on quality tourism. He mentioned that the “tourism identity” of a particular destination is of great importance and presented several projects that his agency has been involved in since 2004. He placed special emphasis on the strengthening of cooperation between Albania and Greece and the further development of bilateral relations in the cross-border area. He also discussed ways in which this cooperation can be enhanced based on each region’s individual assets in a more direct and efficient manner.

The conference culminated in an open discussion focusing on the need for the creation of a framework for horizontal cooperation and the signing of a memorandum of cooperation between Prespa and Korçë. Discussion participants included Prof. Agni Vlavianos Arvanitis and Helen Efraimiadou from the Biopolitics International Organisation, Entela Pinguli from the Biologists of Albania Organisation, Vasileios Taktikos from the Erymanthos Organisation, Gabriela Scheiner from the Cultural Triangle of Prespa, Efthymios Bakas and other conference participants.

For more info <http://www.cbc-biotourism-portal.eu/>

