

ANNEX 2. PROJECT PROFILES

2.A: BULGARIA

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| Project Name: Biodiversity Conservation and Economic Growth (BCEG) (Phases I and II) | Contract Number: LAG-I-00-99-00013-00, Task Order 001 |
| Project Duration: 2000 to 2004 | Funding Mechanism: IQC - BIOFOR, Biodiversity and Sustainable Forestry |
| Strategic Objective: 183-0410 Special Initiatives | |
| Donor Agencies/Partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associates in Rural Development (ARD) • Government of Bulgaria Ministry of Environment and Water • Government of Bulgaria Ministry of Economy • Ministry of Agriculture and Forests • Rila and Central Balkan National Parks • Strandja Nature Park • Foundation for Local Government Reform • Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism • Bulgarian Tourism Union • Pirin Tourism Forum • Regional Tourism Association of Stara Planina • Conservation NGO's s.a. Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds • US Agency for International Development • United Nations Development Program • Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe • World Bank/Global Environment Facility | |

CONTEXT

Bulgaria has a rich history and a unique and internationally significant nature and culture; conservation and cultural identity are particularly strong in rural areas. The country, which is positioned at a crossroads between Europe and Asia, contains nine World Heritage sites, and has rich cultural, historical, and religious resources reaching back from the ancient Greeks and beyond medieval times. It contains mountain ski resorts, beaches with sun and sand (the self-named “sun-and-sand-stalag”), and many “wild” and undeveloped rural areas for adventure seekers. These resources provide a strong base for tourism in Bulgaria.

In the mid-1990s, while many sectors of the Bulgarian economy were registering losses, statistics reported by the National Statistic Institute and Ministry of Finance show the tourism sector was steadily generating positive financial results. In 2002, international tourist arrivals increased in 2002 by 8.6 percent (and in 2003, the increase grew to 18.01 percent), income generated from tourism increased by 11.1 percent (\$1.334 billion), and expenditures by Bulgarians traveling abroad increased by 8.24 percent.

The two principal sectors of the Bulgarian tourism industry include mass tourism, which is focused on natural resources and caters to high volume/low value programs, and specialized tourism based on niche markets and focused on high end/high price consumers. Prior to the BCEG project, the Bulgarian tourism industry focused on the mass tourism sector, which did not significantly enhance the Bulgarian economy by generating high per-tourist revenues. To increase the amount of revenue per tourist and keep more of the money in Bulgaria, efforts shifted toward capturing higher end markets for niche tourism.

Four government agencies oversee elements of the tourism industry along with their local bodies. The Ministry of the Economy handles licensing and categorization; the Ministry of Health controls in-house pollution and sanitary standards; the Ministry of Environment and Waters regulates outdoor pollution and the quality of the environment; and the Ministry of Territorial Development oversees infrastructure (e.g., construction, roads, and urban planning).

These agencies now view tourism as a key tool to promote sustainable economic growth, with the following corollary benefits to the country's fiscal, political, and natural resource health:

- Strategic assessment planning and implementation
- Decentralized government and capacity-building
- Rural development
- SME enterprise development and competitiveness
- Natural resources and protected area management
- Market access and export development
- Models of partnerships for ecotourism between protected areas and local communities.

Project Objectives

The BCEG project had the cross-cutting goals of promoting economic growth and reducing poverty. Project objectives aimed to:

- Accelerate development and growth of private firms in a competitive environment
- Achieve increased and better-informed citizens' participation in public policy decision-making
- Develop revenue-generating and revenue-capture mechanisms for Bulgarian national parks and buffer communities
- Engage the public and key target groups about national parks in participation with decision-making and management of protected areas

Ecotourism was seen as a vehicle to help Bulgaria achieve nature conservation and biodiversity protection, rural development, government decentralization, and new employment opportunities. By setting Bulgaria up as a travel destination, an investment opportunity, a political ally, and a region committed to environmental quality, ecotourism would enhance the country's image internationally, creating a competitive advantage and a sustainable tourism brand.

Sustainable tourism policy challenges to be addressed included:

- Protection and conservation of unique cultural and natural resources
- Deregulation of the industry to allow the private sector to operate in an enhanced competitive environment
- Establishment of a major role for the private sector
- Coordination of essential governmental policies and services at the national, regional, and local levels
- Development of an effective marketing and promotion program through a public/private sector cooperative effort
- Transformation of the role of the public sector from that of the control/regulator to planner/facilitator;
- Fostering a positive awareness by the public of the contribution of tourism to prosperity

Approach

During the first phase of the BCEG project, work focused on developing mechanisms to encourage sustainable natural resources conservation and management while generating income. The project worked in Bulgaria's Rila National Park and Central Balkan National Park, using the competitive cluster approach to develop an operational model of ecotourism destination development. This included eco-enterprise development through ecotourism and non-timber natural resources management (small enterprise development supporting biodiversity conservation), capturing and generating biodiversity conservation funding; developing, obtaining approval for, and implementing management plans for Rila and Central Balkan National Parks; developing a management plan for Rila Monastery Nature Park; and improving public awareness to ensure support for biodiversity conservation.

The second phase of the project expanded activities to the national level, developing a sustainable tourism policy and action plan to be delivered through public/private partnerships, and which is anticipated to contribute significantly to Bulgaria's growing GDP in the period 2004-2010. In March 2002, a voluntary National Ecotourism Working Group (NEW Group) was formed to develop the framework for this National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan (NETSAP). Input to plan development was rigorously solicited from a broad range of stakeholders at regional and municipal levels, and the framework for a national strategy was released at the First National Ecotourism Forum in October 2002. The meeting attracted nearly 180 participants from government ministries, tourism organizations, nongovernmental organizations, regional tourism associations and councils, commercial banks, and private entrepreneurs. Bulgaria's three ministries signed the tourism protocol at the forum. Drafts of the National Strategy were released in February and June 2003, and a National Action Plan was released in December 2003. A second National Ecotourism Forum was held in January 2004. The formal Bulgarian National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan was completed in 2004, and presented to the National Tourism Council in November, where it was accepted. Bulgaria's Prime Minister has indicated that the government will fund the action plan beginning in 2005. Twelve regional action plans that were developed as a foundation for the national approach complement the national plan.

Ecotourism goals were addressed using the "triple bottom line" approach, which included social, environmental, and economic components. Within the private sector, economic and marketing considerations were evaluated to see how the tourism market could be sustained and enhanced over the long term. Tourism's social, cultural, and ecological aspects were also considered to see how communities, cultures, and natural resources cultures could best be sustained, rather than degraded.

In setting Bulgaria's action agenda for sustainable tourism, active policy dialogues linking tourism to local, regional, national, and transnational plans and priorities were conducted. The NEW Group worked to create a positive image, brand identity, and positioning strategy to attract national and international

visitors. Facilitation procedures and financial mechanisms were established to coordinate and use resources from the Government of Bulgaria, donors, and the private sector sources to achieve project objectives. The group benchmarked and adopted best practices (tested models, innovative programs, planning tools, lessons learned, and evaluation mechanisms), which were then disseminated to government agencies, businesses, and NGOs.

Achievements

Important achievements during the development of Bulgaria's Strategy and Action Plan included the following:

- An Ecotourism Monitoring Guidebook was developed to support rural ecotourism development in association with Rila and Central Balkan National Parks. Using the guide, an assessment of the state of ecotourism in Samakov pilot region was carried out in the summer of 2002.
- Management plans were developed, approved by the Government of Bulgaria, and implemented for the two national parks and Rila Monastery's Nature Park.
- A sustainable model for collaborative management of natural resources was developed and implemented.
- A National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan for Bulgaria was created and endorsed by the ministries.
- Twelve Ecotourism Destination Action Plans were designed.
- A national ecotourism market survey was conducted.
- Two ecotourism associations were institutionalized at Rila and Central Balkans National Parks, and training in hospitality skills, marketing, and membership promotion were provided to the two ecotourism associations.
- Several community ecotourism associations were created, and destination management plans developed for two of these associations.
- An endowed Protected Areas Fund was established and institutionalized for the first time in southeastern Europe.
- A manual was developed for ecotourism product development, training was conducted, and study tours were made.
- A detailed system of indicators for success and impact measurement was developed (see below).
- Public awareness was improved, increasing nationally and locally through the production and distribution of a national parks multimedia CD, websites, publications, media publications, and conservation education materials.

The National Ecotourism Action Plan had several themes:

- Information management
- Ecotourism enterprise development
- Product development and quality assurance
- Marketing and promotion
- Human resource development and training
- Institutional development

The NEW Group and the Ecotourism Initiative Groups have developed a strong and comprehensive set of indicators to measure the success and impacts of ecotourism on the rural landscape. The indicators monitor social and economic conditions as well as impacts to the community and the natural environment. The University of Sofia Tourism Department assists with baseline and ongoing data collection. The project has developed an indicators handbook that includes the following indicators:

- Number of management plans revised and submitted to Council of Ministers
- Number of annual operation plans guiding park management plan implementation
- Number of projects implemented per park management theme
- Number of public awareness strategies prepared and implemented during a two-year period
- Number of training courses conducted in support of protected area management
- Number of areas managed by co-management agreement
- Number of park-based regional consultative workshops
- Number of income-generating projects
- Number of ecotourism strategies prepared
- Number of ecotourism models operationalized
- Number of innovative financing mechanisms developed and tested
- Number of public awareness events held in support of management planning
- Number of targeted public awareness events and materials

The project overall has generated national pride in Bulgaria's culture, hospitality, and environment. It has created a base for tourism product diversification, encouraged concrete local initiatives toward implementing tourism activities, created synergies among donors, and, with the NEW Group, has institutionalized a replicable planning process.

Lessons Learned

The process of developing ecotourism strategies and implementation plans has yielded several critical lessons for the two national parks and the country as a whole. One is the need to involve all key stakeholders from the onset; also important is that the planning process is conducted as a bottom-up approach that focused on obtaining input and direction from existing regional and local associations.

An enabling national environment (policy, regulation, and national market promotion) is vital to the sustained success of a tourism initiative. This should be complemented with an agenda that identifies actions to implement sustainable tourism policies at the transnational, national, regional, and local levels.

Publicity at national and local levels is important to educate both the government and the people about the significance of their natural, cultural, and historical resources, and to achieve national consensus on the adoption of a sustainable tourism policy and specific action plan items. Kamelia Georgieva, in-country coordinator for the BCEG project, confirmed, "Sustainable tourism development is about social and political engineering, as well as enterprise development."

Other lessons learned during the five-year project include:

- Strong links with local government planning and decentralization are essential.
- Long-term technical support to governments, NGOs, and the private sector are needed to implement the sustainable tourism agenda.
- Ecotourism product development is important.
- An initial focus on domestic markets will build the confidence needed to expand into the global market.
- International networking and global market development are critical.

NETSAP development has been a pioneering event that has made Bulgaria a leader in the region and across Europe. Many of its successes can be attributed to the broad base of participation and ownership for the plan that was solidly established at the regional level. The short timeframe for development of the

strategy, initially seen as a constraint, ultimately helped the process succeed as it forced participants to make decisions and act creatively. Building on already established successful relationships between Bulgaria’s protected areas and local tourism associations also contributed to NETSAP’s success. Stakeholders could share knowledge and experience and use the existing relationships as a reality check for the larger planning process.

Opportunities and Next Steps

As indicated earlier, Bulgaria’s Prime Minister has indicated that the Government of Bulgaria will fund the Action Plan beginning in 2005. Under the Action Plan, the Government and the NEW Group will continue to facilitate decentralized governance and community-based tourism through a variety of activities:

- Programs and events for shared experiences between visitors and residents
- Support for SME development rather than simply creating more jobs
- Promotion of environmental protection and heritage conservation
- Development of shared infrastructure systems that benefit visitors and residents
- Empowerment of communities and subsidies

The Government of Bulgaria could work with USAID to develop a Global Development Alliance (GDA) for Sustainable Tourism. This GDA activity could undertake a series of broadly replicable activities, including:

- Developing quality assurance systems: EMS, environmental health, and food safety certification
- Developing environmental, economic, and social assessment baselines and monitoring systems
- Establishing best management practices and voluntary certification systems
- Promoting low-impact tourism
- Reducing the negative impacts of conventional large-scale tourism developments
- Improving local capacity to properly plan and manage tourism
- Promoting market access and competitiveness
- Supporting credit facilities and capital investment sources
- Promoting global development assistance and private-sector partnerships

The table below presents a mid-term assessment made by a consulting group, J.E. Austin Associates, of the second phase of the BCEG project. Many of the ideas have been captured with NETSAP, and all are equally valid for future applications of Bulgaria’s National Tourism Strategy.

| Opportunity | Method |
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| 1. Competitive Positioning | <i>Opportunity:</i> Examine destinations within Bulgaria that incorporate its most engaging products and match these to markets, human resources, capacity limitations, and investment requirements. Develop a strategy to brand an authentic “Old Europe” experience for some Bulgarian destinations. Expand services to higher value clients. |
| 2. Customer Learning | <i>Opportunity:</i> Develop better understanding of market trends and current and potential customers’ requirements and develop a comprehensive strategy and common cluster actions for attracting them. Ensure that the necessary supporting factors support marketing to niche markets. |
| 3. Innovation | <i>Opportunity:</i> Offer a greater mix of products including those that speak to particular niche market groups. Study market trends and employ cultural, historic, and natural resources to access new market groups. Enhance the marketing of Sofia as a vacation gateway and business destination. Develop themed packages based on cultural activities and regional tour routes, such as linkages with the wine and perfume industries to provide tour programs based on these two industries. These innovations will assist Bulgarian providers learn more about customer trends and requirements. |

| Opportunity | Method |
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| 4. Human Capital Investment | <i>Opportunity:</i> Work with training institutions to incorporate more updated and diverse curriculum offerings, especially in the area of hospitality training. Upgrade management training programs to modernize skills. Assist in the penetration of information technology training and usage. |
| 5. Cluster Cooperation | <i>Opportunity:</i> Stimulate greater inter-cluster cooperation, not only with supporting industries but also among direct partners such as tour operators, trainers. Stimulate regional cooperation among neighboring countries. Cultivate common interests among competitors. |
| 6. Forward Integration | <i>Opportunity:</i> Work more closely with business partners and clients to clearly identify and effectively respond to their requirements of the customers. Provide new services based on customer requirements. |
| 7. Strategies and Attitudes | <i>Opportunity:</i> Expand cluster advertising efforts for the entire industry. Take responsibility for the development of strategies and the search for investment opportunities. Focus on provision of higher end/value products and services. |

Source: J.E. Austin Associates, Inc./MSI-Bulgaria. *Tourism Industry Assessment*. March, 2002.

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