Interreg
Danube Transnational Programme
SaveGREEN

Project: Safeguarding the functionality of transnationally important ecological corridors in the Danube basin

Acronym: SaveGREEN

Duration: 1 July 2020 – 30 November 2022

Budget: € 2 756 617,57

Partners:

- **Austria**: WWF Central and Eastern Europe, Environment Agency Austria (EAA)
- **Bulgaria**: Black Sea NGO Network; Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
- **Czech Republic**: Friends of the Earth Czech Republic; Transport Research Centre Czech Republic
- **Hungary**: CEEweb for Biodiversity; Szent Istvan University
- **Romania**: Zarand Association; WWF Danube Carpathian Programme Romania
- **Slovakia**: WWF Slovakia; SPECTRA Centre of Excellence of EU

Associated Partners:

- **Austria**: Austrian Ministry for Transport, Innovation, and Technology; Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism
- **Bulgaria**: Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Executive Forest Agency; Southwestern State Enterprise SE – Blagoevgrad
- **Czech Republic**: Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic; Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic
- **France**: Infrastructure and Ecology Network Europe (IENE)
- **Germany**: Bavarian State Ministry of the Environment and Consumer Protection
- **Greece**: EGNATIA ODOS S.A.
- **Hungary**: NIF National Infrastructure Developing Private Company Limited; Ministry of Agriculture; Danube-Ipoly National Park Directorate
- **Romania**: Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests; Ministry of Public Works, Development and Administration; Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure and Communications
- **Slovakia**: State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic; Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic; Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic; National Motorway Company
- **Ukraine**: M.P. Shulgin State Road Research Institute State Enterprise – DerzhdorNDI SE; Department of Ecology and Nature Resources of Zakarpattia Oblast Administration

Background

In the Carpathians and other mountain ranges of the Danube region, plenty of ecological corridors are under threat — or, even more, have already been impeded — by poorly envisioned economic development. Among a few examples of this, the construction of linear transport infrastructure, energy supply infrastructure and settlements — especially in river valleys — and intensive agricultural, forestry and water management practices. If not adequately planned, all these man-made interventions can bring conflict for not addressing the critical need of maintaining ecological connectivity and the flow of multiple ecosystem services.

Ecological connectivity is the backbone of Green Infrastructure (GI). It provides ecosystem services and contributes to climate change resilience. Its ongoing rupture is, nevertheless, of growing gravity. This is especially the case in Eastern Europe where, due to historic and administrative capacity constraints, inter-ministerial cooperation and stakeholder involvement from different sectors is limited. Consequently, the functionality of GI decreases, impacting both humans and wildlife.

Moreover, mitigation measures, such as green bridges, are either often missing or dysfunctional due to inadequate design, location, and inappropriate land-use management. The most noticeable impacts: traffic-kills and lowered reproductive success of key species dependent on functional corridors.

The challenge ahead: to reduce the pressure from such forms of economic activities on natural areas by minimising the impact on the natural processes and securing eco-connectivity — especially, in bottleneck locations. There is, indeed, some experience in the region on how to mitigate these impacts of economic development, but little is done to comprehensively monitor the functionality of mitigation measures and their effectiveness — so to learn from examples and integrate learnings into future plans.

Summary of the SaveGREEN project

The SaveGREEN project will demonstrate that, through integrated planning, the design of appropriate mitigation measures, and the adequate ways to maintain and improve the functionality of ecological corridors, can be achieved. The monitoring of the impact of such measures will, moreover, allow the project to derive the proper set of recommendations for follow-up actions and policy design.

SaveGREEN will work towards this aim by fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, building capacities for the replication of pilots, and upscaling results through improved policy frameworks. It will, thus, contribute to fostering the conservation of natural heritage and work towards sustainable resource use by strengthening joint and integrated approaches with key players affecting the integrity of these resources — including GI. In addition, SaveGREEN will foster the preservation of ecological corridors and identify where and how action is needed towards restoring connectivity by addressing existing pressures and imminent threats stemming from economic development projects.

Additionally, the project will address these challenges by improving national and European Union (EU) policy and funding frameworks, building capacity of authorities and practitioners, standardising the monitoring of measures, and strengthening cross-sectoral platforms at the local, national and international levels.

The project will focus on the critical ecological corridors of the Alpine-Carpathian Corridor, the Southwestern Carpathians, Zakarpattia, Beskydy, Lyulin, and the Balkan Mountains — all of them impacted by linear transport projects and unsustainable land use. All in all, it will create best practice examples in seven pilot areas with different landscape matrices.

The partnership covers key sectors to be involved in integrated planning of mitigation measures: nature conservation (i.e. ministries, agencies, authorities and NGOs), research and education (i.e. universities and a research institution), transport (i.e. ministries and motorway companies), consultancy business (i.e. a limited company), and Associated Strategic Partners (ASPs) from complementary sectors from Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

Main objectives

The project will aim to foster cross-sectoral and transnational cooperation, as well as building a comprehensive know-how, towards the development of concrete solutions aimed at improving, restoring and preserving the functionality of key ecological corridors in Carpathian, Alpine and Bulgarian mountain valleys. It will cover these areas due to the overlapping concentration of both human activities and critical points for wildlife migration, which renders high degrees of conflict.

SaveGREEN's main objective will be achieved through:

1. **Increasing the knowledge and experience of relevant authorities and stakeholders** via capacity building programmes and the dissemination of the key results coming from the Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) projects TRANSGREEN, ConnectGREEN, and HARMON, as well as from SaveGREEN itself, on how to maintain and improve the functionality and financing of GI.
2. **Cross-sectoral joint planning of robust mitigation measures** for securing connectivity. This will be based on careful planning and design, secured funding, cross-sectoral dialogues, and sound scientific knowledge embedded in proper site-management.
3. **Establishing international and national governance frameworks** which are more supportive of maintaining ecological corridors for the preservation of Danube's biodiversity values.

This new approach of involving, in a participatory way, key stakeholders from the relevant sectors (i.e. transport, forestry, agriculture, water management, and hunting) that affect the natural heritage and ecological connectivity creates the basis for generating long-term measures and solutions to the continuous and growing pressure on biodiversity. The aforementioned will be materialised in seven local action plans. Moreover, these will be used to improve the management plans of the relevant Natura 2000 sites, as well as the relevant strategic and development plans at the county/regional and national levels. Finally, they will also be used to formulate higher level policy recommendations — at the Carpathian, Danube region, and EU levels) and improve the capacities for dealing with fragmentation, climate change and resilience.

Main expected results

The project expects that, through the improvement of cross-sectoral cooperation in the fields of nature conservation, natural assets management (i.e. wildlife, forests, water), transport, and land use/spatial planning, it will enhance GI coherence in the Carpathian, Alpine and Balkan mountain valleys. It will do so by planning and implementing coherent integrated mitigation measures to minimise the negative impact of economic development.

Key stakeholders — including public authorities —will be trained on:

1. Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) targeting ecological connectivity;
2. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for projects in ecological corridors;
3. Developing integrated mitigation measures for the maintenance of corridors;
4. Developing action plans for Green Infrastructure improvement in the pilot areas — with clear and adequate technical specifications; and
5. Securing funding for the implementation of mitigation measures.

The **local cross-sectoral operational plans** developed with stakeholder groups —for at least seven locations across seven countries in the Danube region — will present innovative and integrated solutions for increasing ecological functionality in the respective areas.

The participatory approach for development will create ownership by those who have the power to implement the plans. Moreover, stakeholder groups in the pilot areas will benefit from the uptake of learnings from other pilot areas with complementary foci (e.g. agriculture, forestry, water management) and results of the ConnectGREEN and TRANSGREEN projects at the transnational level.

At the policy level, the new national programmes for the disbursement of EU funds will include financial allocations for environmental measures.

Strategic documents on sustainable transport and green infrastructure, ecological connectivity and large carnivore's populations and their sustainable management and conservation will be considered by the upcoming 6th Conference of the Parties to the Carpathian Convention(COP6), while ecological connectivity will be mainstreamed into EU, EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), and cross-macro-regional policy.

Project Activities

(activities for a special interest of the Carpathian Convention and its bodies, especially CCIC and relevant WGs are highlighted in red with a further elaboration of the activities on next page p. 6)

- Development of a standardised monitoring methodology for structural and functional connectivity
- Development of an application toolbox for the monitoring of structural and functional connectivity
- Development of a capacity building programme
- Engagement and cooperation with relevant stakeholders of specific pilot areas
- Development of cross-sectoral operational plans to safeguard the functionality of ecological corridors in the pilot areas
- Implementation of selected actions of the local cross-sectoral operational plans
- **Support the mainstreaming of ecological connectivity into EU and global policies through cooperation among macro-regional strategies**[i] (i.e. EUSDR and the Carpathian Convention)
- Development of recommendations towards the integration of mitigation measures/GI into sectoral policy and decision making
- **Strengthening of cross-sectoral cooperation among key players, promotion of project results in the Danube basin and beyond, and capacity building at the national level**[ii]
- Deliverance of several types of publications
- Organisation of public events
- Digital communications
- Development of promotional materials

The Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention will support the project in regard to the activities relevant for the Convention and promoting of the project at relevant fora.

Pilot areas

1. Kobernausser forest (Austria)
2. Alpine (Austria)-Carpathian (Slovakia) Corridor (on the Austria side)
3. Beskydy-Kysuce mountains (Czech Republic-Slovakia)
4. Trans-boundary area between North Hungary and South Slovakia
5. Zakarpatska region (Ukraine)
6. Corridor area between the Apuseni Mountains and the main Carpathian arch (Romania)
7. Struma valley and Stara Planina (Bulgaria)

[i] Development of the high-level joint regional policy declaration

The high-level joint regional policy declaration on maintaining and restoring ecological corridors/ green infrastructure will address the need for transnational and cross-sectoral cooperation in the Danube-Carpathian region, and will be elaborated together with the EUSDR and the Carpathian Convention. The overall goal is to develop and commit to a coordinated cross-border and cross-sector approach for spatial planning and nature conservation in the region. As a policy tool, the joint declaration will summarize principles and criteria for environmentally sustainable spatial planning in the Danube-Carpathian regions, including the maintenance of existing and the development of future GI infrastructures.

The Carpathian Convention has concluded Memoranda of Understanding with various EUSDR Priority Areas. This will be the basis for cooperation on the development of the high-level joint regional policy declaration and would raise the visibility of the Carpathian Convention in the context of EUSDR. Furthermore, the Carpathian Convention can be the link to global intentions to safeguarding ecological corridors among others. Here, we refer to CBD and its Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, and UNEP Environment Programme.

[ii] Capacity building programme plus training events

The Capacity building programme addressing public authorities and other key stakeholders will provide a set of tools

- Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Toolkit,
- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Toolkit including cost- benefit analysis of environmental impacts of the respective projects and
- Handbook of best practice examples

that allows a better understanding of human impacts on green infrastructure and the implementation of measures to prevent and reduce impacts. These tools will facilitate a better understanding of the impacts by all stakeholders, especially decision makers. The tools will integrate the experience of TRANSGEEN (Guideline on Wildlife and Traffic, EIA training package) and ConnectGREEN (Training package on identifying and managing ecological corridors) projects, as well as other EU projects with results of all SaveGREEN activities.

SEA and EIA are the two main instruments that ensure the integration of environmental considerations in the preparation of plans and project throughout the Member States, both procedures allowing the participation of all relevant stakeholders. Impact assessment is a technical process with many difficulties regarding the choice of methodologies, the assessment of alternatives, the involvement of stakeholders or the integration of other EU Directives requirements. Recently, requirements have been added regarding the adaptation to climate change or the need for an integrated assessment of the impact on green infrastructure, which is difficult without a step-by-step and easy to use toolkit. Among the new approaches proposed by these tools is the use of simple impact indicators that allow facile comparison of alternatives and financial quantification of the impacts on GI. The toolkits are essential for both decision makers and consultants in the field environmental assessments. We believe that this tool will support further sustainable transport infrastructure development in the Carpathians.

Towards the end of the project, national capacity training events for public authorities and key stakeholders will be organised in the participating countries, where we hope to get support from your side for the adaptation of the programme to national needs, advertising of the events and dissemination of the capacity programme in your respective countries.