

Multilateral Dialogue in the Prokletije/ Bjeshkët e Namuna (Accursed Mountains)

Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro

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Multilateral Dialogue in the Prokletije/ Bjeshkët e Namuna partnered with the established UK non-profit organization (registered Charity no 1105447): the Balkans Peace Park Project (B3P) to enhance multilateral dialogue between the youth of Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. This project's goal was to begin a dialogue between the youth of each of the three states by focusing on the shared environment and future collaboration around eco-tourism.

B3P annually holds summer programs for the youth separately in each state. The completed aspects of *Multilateral Dialogue in the Prokletije/ Bjeshkët e Namuna* include: 1 week summer environmentally themed programs for 20 youth in each Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro to promote collaboration between the youth, guesthouses, and eco-tourism sectors. The Albanian sector of this project was additionally funded by the US Embassy in Tirana and the Montenegrin sector by B3P. These funds provided overhead costs of the Summer Programs such as transportation, wages, and accommodations for other volunteers and translators.

For the first project, the program promoted dialogue by having the participating youth create postcards together. During this project each youth drew his or her community's key environmental features with an added description on the back. For the second project, the youth discussed the local natural highlights and mapped them on a boundary-less regional map. The third project had the youth discuss future activities that they would enjoy planning and partaking, such as an international gathering. The postcard project was successful across all age groups, but the description aspect was challenging in that some children wrote in English while others wrote in their local language. Translating the description on the cards was considered before the postcards were mailed internationally to the other communities; but it was decided to leave the postcards as originally created. The mapping project was more successful amongst the older individuals, perhaps because it required map reading skills that the younger participants did not have. The map was able to represent the shared regional environment only after multiple locations had been involved. Local meetings with owners and discussions with teenagers all led to a greater desire to pool resources and advertising for regional eco-tourism collaboration.

Cultural barriers existed between the Ashkali, Bošnjaci, and Romani youth in Pejë, Kosovo due to difference in local customs and traditions. Some of these barriers were reinforced by the gender and age differences of the youth who attended. Among these barriers were different attendance based on the weather, different preferences on indoor and outdoor activities, and different attitudes towards group and individual work. In spite of these barriers, this project was successful in providing tools for the Albanian, Montenegrin, and Kosovar youth in the Accursed Mountains to begin a dialogue about and across the borders. The following summer the postcard project will be replaced by another traveling project. Although a physical exchange did not occur this year, the exchange is already being talked about for the summer of 2015, fueled by contacts made on the ground and the overt interest expressed by students. As a sustainability effort, \$1200 was left behind for the costs and planning of the first youth exchange between Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro.

In the recently stabilized Balkans, sustainable efforts are imperative because it is the presence of collaboration, rather than the absence of conflict, that defines peace in this region. There have been few, if any, times in the western Balkans history that have been without conflict because they are at the intersection of many crossroads. Yet, in the sense of collaboration, peace is possible. Collaboration may take many forms and can exist between neighbors, between organizations, and between states. Here collaboration means sharing goals. We know that the people have similar goals: to preserve the environment, to improve social and economic stability, and to create a better future. It is important that people are made aware that their goals are shared by others across political and economic lines. By

emphasizing these commonalities, collaboration can be used to achieve common goals. Through collaboration we can find peace.

For this project collaborative peace was defined locally and regionally. In the short-term--a single class--collaborative peace was experienced. During one eco-tourism class we had a discussion on whether the communities in Prokletije/ Bjeshkët e Namuna should share a webpage for their guesthouses. The discussion began with a general attitude that the village should emphasize solely the local opportunities for tourists. Because of this, we led a discussion about the Albanian, Kosovar, and Montenegrin villages that are located only a 20-30 kilometers away. Many teenagers had never heard of the villages outside of their own. Therefore emphasis was placed on shared struggles and shared natural resources. We noted that tourists are interested in the region and enjoy visiting the entire region, not just a single village. Within the hour the students' perspectives changed in a way that surprised even the most seasoned regional volunteer. They claimed that collaborating across the political and geographical boundaries when advertising would be beneficial for all of Prokletije/ Bjeshkët e Namuna. This is an example of how the acceptance of collaboration contributed to peace immediately.

But how can this collaborative will be maintained in the long-term? With regards to the youth, the postcards will be hung from their two collaborating states (for example Kosovar postcards will be sent to Albania and Montenegro) to remind them of their shared environmental interests and features. The maps will also be passed through the three countries in order for the youth to see the final project and to add another layer to the symbols such as lakes, springs, caves, and mountains. However, for collaboration to be maintained and improved, eco-tourism must emphasize the primary highlight: its transboundary characteristic. I find that in order for this project to contribute to long-term peace, the transboundary nature of the area must not only be discussed but experienced by the local residents. The region welcomes many tourists who hike the Peaks of the Balkans trail, traversing the three states in about 200 kilometers. However, the local residents remain in their respective villages. While this project exposed the youth and adults alike to the benefits of regional collaboration through a multilateral dialogue, physical interaction between the people within the region must occur regularly for the collaboration to be considered an extension of peace. Efforts are in place to plan an exchange for the youth and for the national parks to collaborate more closely.

This project was a deeper, multinational version of my first volunteer experience with B3P in Albania. Previously, I had written on the region and its transboundary efforts, but I had not experienced it firsthand. Because the focus of B3P was Albania, I returned unsure if I had helped a single person or if their peace platform had been promoted. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, a series of splinter organizations have left the region just as segmented, reinforcing the practice of acting separately rather than collaboratively. I was determined, to reinforce the importance of dialogue in the region, within the limits of the parent organization. The level of support that each community committed to my project has changed the way I think about the challenges facing the region. While the villages support regional collaboration, it was the international actors who were unable to collaborate from afar.

This project reinforced my belief that dialogue can bridge political differences as we discover that we possess common goals. What seems clear to me now I wasn't so sure about while planning the project. Responses to emails were hard to obtain and those obtained were contrary to one another. Once I arrived in person, however, it was as if full support had and was the main intention. My skepticism faded as I realized our varying communicative methods. More than anything else the individuals working with the national parks look hopefully upon the prospect of collaborating with their neighboring communities and the youth are elated about the prospect of an international summit in future summers.

"In many ways this project has reinforced my understanding of on-the-ground work and the importance of the local actors. As much as the world desires peace in the western Balkans, it will only happen if this desire is shared by the residents. " -Kelsey Aho

