

BESTbelt Summary Report

1 General information

1.1 Project title	Balkania Route: Two steps towards others
1.2 Project reference number	BN_23_33
1.3 Region	Balkans
1.4 Name of coordinating beneficiary	Bulgarian Biodiversity foundation
1.5 Names of co-beneficiaries	1. Team Serbia 2. Association Ambrozija 3. Back to Nature 4. PPNE
1.6 Project start date and end date	01/11/2023 – 31/10/2024
1.7 Total project budget (€)	59,982.06 Euro
1.8 Total duration (in months)	(12 months)
1.9 Report submission date	6.12.2024
1.10 Name(s) and contact details of reporting person(s)	Petar Vanev petar.vanev@biodiversity.bg

2 List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BBF	Bulgarian Biodiversity foundation
PPNEA	Protection and preservation of natural environment in Albania
EGB	European Green Belt
BGB	Balkan Green Belt

3 Summary Report

3.1 Project overview

Please provide a brief overview of the project, recalling:

- The location of the project activities (include a map, if possible).
- The issues(s) the project aimed to tackle.
- The project's approach to address the issue(s).
- What the project aimed to achieve.

- 6 Balkan countries – Serbia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Turkey
- Issues the project tackled: People from the Balkans are more prone to recognise the Iron curtain than the European Green belt (EGB). Even if one decides to start exploring the region, the information is scarce, not accessible online, reliable and up-to-date.
- Approach to address issues: Through the exploration of the development of the Balkan Green belt as long-distance hiking route we created an unconventional campaign in the social media channels (Facebook, Instagram and Youtube) – sharing photo and video content. All this is highlighting the natural and cultural heritage of the regions along the Balkan Green belt while strengthening and supporting transboundary cooperation.
- The project aimed to develop a concept for a long-distance hiking trail along the Balkan Green belt

Also raise awareness among 10 000 young people from the Balkan countries where the BGB trail goes through.



With financial support of the European Union

3.2 Project developments

Brief summary of the project developments over the entire project lifetime (please refer to your updated logical framework). Please explain whether the project achieved all the objectives and expected results.

Be concise with your summary – for details, please use the following sections.

Over the course of the project, significant strides were made in both concept development and awareness-raising activities for the Balkan Green Belt Trail.

1. Concept Development

- A comprehensive 3340 km-long concept for the Balkan Green Belt Trail was finalized, spanning six countries: Serbia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Turkey.
- Ground verification successfully provided detailed GPX tracks, route conditions, and logistical insights.
- The finalized route and data were published on partners websites and social media channels as well as major platforms like Outdooractive and Mapy.cz, ensuring global accessibility for hikers ([see second progress report for website links](#)).

2. Awareness Raising

- A multi-channel communication strategy included social media campaigns, an 18-episode video blog, and digital marketing efforts, reaching over 80,000 viewers.
- Seven awareness-raising events were held across the participating countries, engaging stakeholders and showcasing the project's environmental and cultural significance.
- Young people and local communities were introduced to the concept of the European Green Belt and the trail's potential as a sustainable tourism asset.

Through these efforts, the project not only developed a fully functional hiking trail concept but also succeeded in promoting the European Green Belt as a symbol of unity, conservation, and eco-tourism across the Balkan region.

3.3 Achievements in relation to the objective(s) of the project

Please explain how the project has changed the problems addressed in regards to identified issues. Please also explain the state before and after project implementation in relation to the objectives you formulated in your logical framework. Please reflect to what extent the objectives have been achieved. If there have been any adaptations, please describe the changes and explain why they have been necessary.

The project addressed critical challenges related to the development of a long-distance hiking trail along the Balkan Green Belt and the promotion of awareness about its ecological, historical, and cultural significance. Below is an overview of the progress made in relation to the identified issues, objectives, and necessary adaptations:

State Before the Project

- The concept of the Balkan Green Belt Trail was non-existent, with limited information on feasible routes, logistical support, or the readiness of local stakeholders.
- Awareness of the European Green Belt (EGB) and its potential for sustainable tourism among the Balkan population, particularly young people, was low.
- Key challenges included insufficient resources for route exploration, incomplete mapping data, lack of hiking infrastructure, and inadequate stakeholder engagement.

3.3.1.1 Achievements After Implementation

1. Objective 1: Development of a Usable Concept

- The project finalized a **3340 km trail concept** that connects six countries and provides detailed GPX tracks for hikers.
- Issues like incomplete mapping and logistical gaps were mitigated through ground verification, local collaborations, and rerouting to enhance trail quality.
- The trail is now accessible on **global platforms such as Outdooractive and Mapy.cz**, enabling future use and exploration.

2. Objective 2: Awareness Raising

- Awareness about the EGB and the Balkan Green Belt Trail was raised among over **10,000 people**, including youth, through social media campaigns, a video blog series, and public events.
- **Seven stakeholder events** provided platforms to showcase the trail and its benefits, fostering interest and dialogue on further development.

The project successfully transformed an abstract concept into a tangible, accessible hiking trail while promoting the EGB's values to a wide audience. Adaptations were made proactively to overcome logistical and environmental challenges, ensuring the project's objectives were met and laying the groundwork for further development and impact.

3.4 Successes

What were main successes of the project? Are there any concrete achievements in terms of biodiversity conservation / sustainable use of natural resources / adaptation and mitigation to climate change / ecosystem services?

- The creation of a welcoming work environment for the project's implementation
- The development of the Balkan Green belt trail and project activities, which will link neighboring states, stakeholders and partners with mutual ideas and principals for the protection and preservation of the EGB.
- The synergy within the work team and beyond was contenting and vivid.
- The interest from stakeholders and the community to see and know more about Balkania Route: Two steps towards others
- Full preparation for the ground verification activity during June, July, August and September
- The Balkan Green Belt Trail concept is now fully developed, with detailed GPX tracks, trail conditions, and descriptions uploaded to public platforms like mapy.cz and Outdooractive, making it accessible for hikers worldwide to use and provide feedback which will help the further development of the trail.
- The trail's completion showcases the potential for sustainable tourism, uniting six Balkan countries with a shared vision of environmental and cultural preservation.
- The flexibility of the trail concept allows further development of alternative route and the inclusion of missing Balkan countries – Kosovo, Greece and Romania.
- Outlined crucial information which is necessary for the next steps to further develop the Balkan Green Belt trail and creation of the European Long-distance hiking trail e.g. identical trail mark for the whole entirety of the trail, regional responsibility for each area of the trail etc.
- Partner organizations from Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, and Turkey provided crucial support during ground verification, strengthening cross-border cooperation with BBF.
- Collaborative efforts addressed challenges, such as wildfire reroutes and logistical issues, highlighting the trail's adaptability and the value of regional networks.
- Partnerships with local hiking clubs and stakeholders ensured trail's future maintenance and enhanced the trail's credibility and sustainability, ensuring it remains a valuable resource for eco-tourism and conservation.
- The partnership with Outdooractive has been highly beneficial for the Balkan Green Belt Trail initiative, offering significant advantages in several areas: global Visibility and accessibility, credibility and professional presentation, community building and engagement, sustainability and long-term impact, promotional support

These successes underscore the project's role in promoting sustainable development, regional cooperation, and awareness of the European Green Belt's value while solidifying the Balkan Green Belt Trail as a transformative initiative for the region.

3.5 Challenges

What were main setbacks and challenges over the entire project period?

Scarce information of trail infrastructure: One of the main challenges from the mutual planning of the draft concept was the scarce information of trail infrastructure and missing data from one map to another. Even though the selected Mapy.cz platform has a lot of trails in some regions of Balkans data is missing. We had to use different trail sources and manually map out certain segments of the trail. Other data was in formats not readable for Mapy.cz and we had to find a way to convert it. Regions where hiking infrastructure does exist forced us to use slightly more asphalt routes to bridge different segments of the draft trail.

Environmental and industrial interference: In specific parts of the trail there is presence of wind turbines and mining activities which lead to a more thorough and comprehensive mapping of the areas, enhancing the overall quality safety of the trail.

Migratory Movement: Another significant issue encountered, specifically for Bulgarian/Turkish border, was the movement of migrants along the borders. The presence of undocumented migrants along the route has necessitated the deployment of military personnel at specific points for control and security purposes. While these control points cannot be marked on the route for safety reasons, it has been indicated that foreign hikers carrying proper identification should not face issues.

Limited Amenities: There were limited food, beverage, and accommodation facilities available along specific sections of the route. This scarcity of amenities posed difficulties for hikers and required careful planning and communication about the limited resources available. However, some new businesses have started to emerge, showing a positive trend.

Logistical: Starting as planned in June, the team encountered unusually high temperatures, adding strain to the trek. A lack of reliable information about water sources necessitated carrying 2.5 liters of water daily, with some stretches requiring up to 5.5 liters to safely traverse areas without dehydration risk. While some of the already provided GPX tracks were on track with the roads and trail, others were completely wrong and misleading. There were several occasions where off-track hiking was the only choice to get to safety and reconnect with an existing trail or road. As the trail is currently being developed and only a concept there were numerous stretches of overground trail and hard to impossible passage along the proposed trail route. Those spots were marked in the GPX data for further development of the trail.

Last-minute reroutes were made to reduce asphalt coverage and improve access to water, ensuring a better experience for future hikers. Wildfires presented an additional hazard; while some were anticipated, others were encountered unexpectedly, with flames as close as 1 km away.

Administrative responsibilities, including the submission of the first progress report, further complicated the journey. Clarification requests and filing requirements necessitated multiple stops, adding pressure to an already demanding schedule. Despite these challenges, the team successfully advanced the trail's development, showcasing resilience and adaptability.

3.6 Stakeholder engagement

Please give a reflection on the involvement of the stakeholders in your project. If suitable, please also assess your relationship with the co-beneficiary(ies) and public authorities. Highlight any notable achievement (e.g. new cooperations), lessons learned, feedback regarding the engagement / participation of the various stakeholders.

The Balkan Green Belt Trail project involved a diverse range of stakeholders, whose support and collaboration were essential to its successful implementation. These stakeholders included hiking clubs, mountaineering associations, municipalities, border police, hiking and outdoor platforms, and NGOs active within the European Green Belt (EGB). Below is an overview of their roles, contributions, and the insights gained during the reporting period.

Border Police

The role of border police was pivotal during the ground verification phase. Constant communication was maintained to ensure the safety of the field researcher, especially given the complexities of border regions and the ongoing challenges posed by illegal immigration. Their support and willingness to facilitate the process underscored their importance as partners in the future development of the trail. A key lesson learned is the potential for creating “green passages” through mountain border areas with special permits. This would make the trail more attractive by reducing reliance on official border checkpoints, which currently act as the only crossing points.

Hiking Clubs and Mountaineering Associations

Although limited time during the ground verification phase restricted broader engagement, there were notable interactions with local hiking clubs in certain regions. These groups expressed interest in the trail and its maintenance in their local areas where they normally hike on annual basis. Such relationships represent an opportunity to build sustainable, community-driven systems for trail upkeep and further development. For instance, in North Macedonia, logistical support from a local hiking club allowed us to address a the missing section of 250 km due to wildfire-related reroute, showcasing the critical value of their involvement.

Local Stakeholders and Municipalities

Direct engagement with local stakeholders and municipalities was minimal during the ground verification due to the tight timeline; however, interest from individuals encountered along the trail highlighted potential for collaboration. Municipalities and local authorities could play a larger role in supporting trail infrastructure and promoting eco-tourism, aligning their development goals with the trail’s objectives.

NGO Partners

The active involvement of NGO partners in the project was instrumental, particularly in the final events of the trail's development. During these events, stakeholders from previous engagement periods were reconvened to review and celebrate the project's outcomes. While some expressed optimism about the trail's future and showed interest in its further development, others voiced concerns about its scope and challenges. These discussions reflected the understanding that the creation of a long-distance trail is an iterative process requiring ongoing collaboration and resource mobilization.

Outdoor Platforms and Communication Partners

The partnership with platform Outdooractive provided a robust framework for trail visibility and promotion. Their support in publishing detailed stage descriptions and GPX tracks of the trail played a crucial role in ensuring accessibility for hikers worldwide. The engagement with these platforms exemplifies how digital tools can enhance stakeholder collaboration and trail adoption.

In conclusion, the engagement of stakeholders in the Balkan Green Belt Trail project has laid a strong foundation for its long-term development. While challenges remain, particularly in engaging local stakeholders more extensively, the support and feedback received highlight the potential for collaborative progress in making the trail a flagship eco-tourism initiative in the Balkan region.

3.7 Visibility of the project

Please list the main products of the project, e.g. workshops held, documents, policy papers, public relation material and describe how they were used. Please add the supporting documents in PDF format in Annex 4 of the report.

The **Balkania Route** project implemented a comprehensive visibility and communication strategy to ensure widespread awareness and engagement among stakeholders and the general public. The following summarizes the main communication activities, products, and their utilization during the reporting period:

Main Products and Activities

Social Media Posts During Ground Verification

Regular updates on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube showcased the ongoing ground verification process.

Posts featured scenic photographs, trail conditions, and insights into the hiking experience, effectively engaging audiences and sparking interest in the trail.

Video Blog Series

An 18-episode video blog documented the ground verification journey, highlighting the trail's cultural, natural, and historical features.

The series achieved significant visibility, garnering over 80,000 views and 1,200 watch hours on YouTube.

This success was bolstered by a digital marketing campaign, which further amplified the reach and impact of the series.

Outdooractive Platform

Detailed GPX tracks and descriptions of the 18 stages of the Balkan Green Belt Trail were published on the Outdooractive platform.

The platform's global reach ensured the trail was accessible to international hiking enthusiasts, with appropriate acknowledgments to the project as per communication guidelines.

Partners' Events

Various events organized by project partners in different countries enhanced face-to-face engagement with local stakeholders and audiences.

These included outdoor hikes, photo exhibitions, presentations, and awareness-raising sessions, showcasing the trail and its broader environmental and cultural significance.

Upload of GPX Tracks on Partner Websites and Social Media

The trail's GPX tracks were shared through partner organizations' websites and social media channels, providing free access to detailed route information.

The shared data included photos, descriptions, and insights into trail conditions, making it easier for hikers to plan their journeys.

Utilization of Communication Products

Raising Awareness: Posts and video content highlighted the European Green Belt's significance, promoting the trail as a unique eco-tourism destination.

Engaging Stakeholders: Partners' events and media efforts created opportunities for dialogue and collaboration with local communities, policymakers, and hiking enthusiasts.

Promoting Accessibility: Publishing GPX tracks on both Outdooractive and partners' platforms ensured the trail was ready for immediate use by the public.

Showcasing Project Achievements: The video blog and social media campaigns effectively communicated the project's progress and successes, building momentum for future development.

Conclusion

The project's visibility efforts were instrumental in raising awareness of the Balkan Green Belt Trail and its alignment with the European Green Belt's values. Through a combination of

digital outreach, stakeholder engagement, and media dissemination, the project achieved significant public exposure, laying a strong foundation for continued promotion and development of the trail.

3.8 Sustainability and replication potential

Please explain how the results and achievements of the project will be continued beyond the lifetime of the project and the BESTbelt programme. Describe the long-term benefits and effects of the project, and provide an estimate of the potential for replicability and transfer of knowledge and experience gained during the project.

The achievements of the project, particularly the finalized Balkan Green Belt Trail concept and the awareness raised about the European Green Belt (EGB), are designed for longevity and scalability.

Long-Term Benefits and Effects

1. Accessible Trail Infrastructure

- The comprehensive GPX tracks and logistical data now publicly available on platforms like Outdooractive and Mapy.cz ensure that the trail remains accessible to hikers worldwide. These resources reduce entry barriers for hikers, encouraging continued use of the trail.
- The adaptable route concept allows for future enhancements, such as rerouting to reduce asphalt coverage, improving water access, and including missing Balkan countries (e.g., Greece, Kosovo, and Romania).

2. Increased Awareness and Eco-Tourism Potential

- The project's extensive communication efforts—video blogs, social media campaigns, and stakeholder events—have laid a strong foundation for ongoing awareness of the trail.
- The trail's establishment contributes to positioning the Balkans as a premier destination for long-distance hiking, fostering eco-tourism and supporting local economies.

3. Stakeholder Engagement and Local Ownership

- The engagement of local hiking clubs, NGOs, municipalities, and border police during the project created a network of stakeholders invested in the trail's future development and maintenance.
- Events and collaborations have inspired a sense of ownership among local communities, ensuring continued interest and involvement in the trail's upkeep and promotion.

The trail concept's adaptability and the region's abundance of natural and cultural heritage make it highly replicable in other parts of the EGB and beyond.

The integration of digital platforms for mapping and outreach provides a scalable framework that can be adopted by similar projects.

Lessons learned regarding environmental challenges, stakeholder engagement, and trail development are universally applicable and can inspire the creation of sustainable trails worldwide.

3.9 Lessons learned/ feedback on experience

Please indicate lessons learned and feedback from all points of view including administrative, technical, financial, and management, for example:

- What went well and what did not go well at all during your project?
- If you had to do again your project, what would you do differently?
- What would your advice be if others wanted to implement a similar project?
- How will you capitalize on these lessons learned in your future activities?

Administrative

What Went Well:

- Clear communication and coordination with partners were key to ensuring smooth operations despite the geographically diverse teams. Regular updates and structured timelines helped mitigate delays.
- Filing the first progress report established a foundation for understanding and navigating administrative processes, including handling clarification requests.

What Did Not Go Well:

- Administrative tasks added pressure during critical project phases, such as ground verification. Balancing fieldwork with reporting obligations proved challenging.

What Would Be Done Differently:

- Allocate a dedicated team member or external support for administrative tasks to reduce pressure on field researchers and ensure smoother progress during critical phases.

Advice to Others:

- Plan for extensive administrative oversight in advance and allocate specific time for reporting and compliance tasks to avoid overlap with field activities.

Technical

What Went Well:

- The use of digital platforms like Outdooractive and Mapy.cz allowed seamless sharing of GPX tracks, making trail data accessible to hikers globally.
- Video documentation during ground verification served as both a promotional tool and a guide for future hikers.

What Did Not Go Well:

- Reliance on free map resources revealed incomplete data, leading to last-minute reroutes and logistical complications.
- Limited technical preparation for specific regions resulted in challenges like unexpected terrain conditions and inaccessible water sources.

What Would Be Done Differently:

- Conduct preliminary route scouting with local stakeholders to validate map data and minimize surprises during ground verification.
- Integrate advanced GIS tools and involve local experts earlier in the project.

Financial

What Went Well:

- Budget allocation for fieldwork and digital marketing campaigns was effectively utilized to achieve visibility goals and complete ground verification.
- Partner collaboration helped optimize resource use and reduce costs in overlapping activities.

What Did Not Go Well:

- Limited financial resources restricted pre-verification planning and extended engagement with local stakeholders.

What Would Be Done Differently:

- Ensure better alignment of the project start date with seasonal and logistical needs to optimize resource allocation.
- Secure additional funding for preliminary research and community engagement.

Management

What Went Well:

- Partner organizations were highly collaborative, and regular communication ensured alignment across countries.
- Stakeholder events successfully brought together key players, reinforcing long-term interest and support.

What Did Not Go Well:

- Limited time for stakeholder engagement during the ground verification phase restricted broader participation.
- Balancing field activities with administrative and reporting demands strained the management team.

What Would Be Done Differently:

- Devote a specific phase of the project solely to stakeholder engagement to build stronger local partnerships before fieldwork.
- Establish clearer management protocols for handling unexpected challenges like wildfires and reroutes.

4 Annexes

Please just attach those annexes who haven't been delivered yet with one of your progress reports.

Annex 1: Updated logical framework

Annex 2: Deliverable(s)

Annex 3: Photos of activities and results (featuring legend and credits)

Annex 4: Copies of communication and visibility activities (publications, articles, etc.)