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The Model Programme to maintain the landscape heritage of the Hetes Border Region of Hungary and Slovenia

Landscape and transfrontier cooperation: The landscape knows no boundary

Background

The unrelenting spread of accelerated agricultural methods and the perceived “need” to satisfy our societies’ demands for convenience and mobility have gradually overtaken and damaged most of Europe’s natural landscapes. The inhabitants near the state border between Slovenia and Hungary have suffered for decades from restricted access and marginalization. During this development the regions around the state border stayed out of this rat race and they remained largely undisturbed, inaccessible and unattractive to planners, settlers, conventional tourists and investors. As a side effect along the state border, unique natural and cultural landscapes have been preserved.

After World War II the border between Hungary and Slovenia (part of the former Yugoslavia), which is a little bit more than 100-kilometre long, was protected by barbed wire, with a ploughed strip of 40 m wide on the Hungarian side, mine fields, watchtowers and border guards. After the Hungarian revolution (1956), the border installations with Yugoslavia were partly dismantled, however, crossing the border was still strictly controlled. The area between the border and the double fence was called the 'border-belt', which even nearby inhabitants could enter only after receiving official permission. The border crosses ethnographic and geographic regions, natural and cultural landscapes, including protected areas dividing them.

In 2004 both countries became member of the European Union. Since the time the role of boundary has changed a lot. The border between Slovenia and Hungary can now be freely crossed and it offers the possibility for transboundary nature conservation and sustainable development. The overshadowed location had the positive side effect that the natural values and special settlement structure remained there, which is a very important heritage for today. Geographically, the area includes low hilly landscapes on the western side of the Pannonian flat. More than 96% of Goričko Nature Park and the whole of Órség National Park became part of Natura 2000. All two border regions faced virtually the same development problems, such as an elderly and undereducated population, mostly small farms without prospects in farming, abandoned fields, having no industry, nor any large infrastructure, long distances from national centres, a depopulated landscape with a high degree of worker migration and a large number of abandoned houses. Big potential is seen in diversification of agriculture activities with a tendency to bioagriculture. Bio-production and local products have a market niche that has not been fully exploited yet. Tourism, in comparison to other economic activities in the cooperation area, has the greatest growth potential.

After the accession to the European Union the cooperation of the neighbouring countries became more intensive. One of the main benefits of transboundary cooperation is the possibility of applying for joint cross border cooperation programmes financially supported by the EU. The bilateral cooperation between Hungary and Slovenia originates in the pre-accession period for example through the trilateral Slovenia – Hungary – Austria programme (1995, 1996), the bilateral Slovene – Hungarian Phare

Cross-border Cooperation Programme (2000-2003), trilateral Neighbourhood Programme Slovenia – Hungary – Croatia (2004-2006), the OP Slovenia-Hungary 2007-2013.

Today there are a lot of collaboration at state level, regional level and local level as well. All of them have significant impact on the landscape. Among other common activities it is worth mentioning that:

- The Órség National Park Directorate (Hungary) has established close cooperation with Goričko Nature Park (Slovenia) and Raab Naturpark (Austria) in the field of eco-tourism and environmental education. The entire trilateral nature park covers an area of 105,200 hectares.;
- Órség National Park Directorate has an Agreement with the Vendvidék Tourism Association;
- Slovenia and Hungary participate in the project “The European Green Belt«, which is one of the most fascinating projects in European nature conservation. Most of the areas along the Green Belt for a long time constituted a forbidden zone where no activity was allowed – in Central Europe the so-called „Iron Curtain“ was one of the most divisive barriers in Europe. The only positive outcome of this strongly protected borderline is that some of the most important remaining habitats for biodiversity in Europe have been preserved. This project links the conservation of Europe’s natural heritage with our human history. It connects people with nature.
- Mura Region Hungarian Local-Government National Community (*Muravidéki Magyar Önkormányzati Nemzeti Közösség - Pomurska madžarska samoupravna narodna skupnost*) participates in regional and state-level decisions several times;
- Hungarian and Slovenian municipalities have cooperated in the restoration of the landscape and community relations since 2003;
- NGOs of the area (e.g. Iron Curtain Trail Association) handle and manage the border area as a single unit;
- The project Borderless cooperation of local communities for the landscape heritage of »Fabulous’ Hetés” involves ten small Slovenian and Hungarian villages of the ethnographic micro-region of Hetés. The central aim of the project was to rehabilitate and strengthen cross-border connections and ties between the two communities once separated by the Iron Curtain. Upon the initiative small Hungarian settlements in the Hetés region have been cooperating with settlements on the Slovenian side of the border since 2003. The aim of the project was to reconnect the landscape links and the socio-cultural and ecological values of this transboundary landscape through rehabilitating connections within the landscape and communities, preserving its landscape heritage and organising programmes for locals focusing on landscape heritage.
- Citizens restored the immediate environment of the border by voluntary work, and built the Road of Friendship and a joint space called the ‘Friendship Park’ in the territory of both countries. They have also contributed to the re-emergence of the strong relationship between both communities of this micro-region a joint space called the ‘Friendship Park’ in the territory of both countries, have also contributed to the re-emergence of the strong relationship between both communities of this micro-region.



Establishing 'Friendship Park' in the border region (photo: Andrea BEDŐ, Bödeháza, Hungary)

The Model Programmeⁱ

In autumn 2013 and spring 2014 a pilot programme was carried out in ten small villages of the transboundary landscape of Hetés. One of the goals of the pilot programme was to survey the valuable natural and cultural historical landscape elements of Hetés with the participation of local communities using local knowledge and to uncover the opportunities making the conservation and the sustainable use of these landscape elements possible. The other goal of the pilot programme was to establish a greenway that enables the sustainable use of these landscape features for tourism.

In 2013 and 2014, the detailed survey of the unique landscape assets of the Hetés region (on the Hungarian side Bödeháza, Gáborjánháza, Szijártóháza and Zalasombatfa, on the Slovenian side Genterovci – Göntérháza, Kamovci – Kámaháza, Radmožanci – Radamos, Žitkovci – Zsitkóc, Mostje – Hídvég and Banuta – Bánuta) was carried out in two stages. The first stage comprised of an expert assessment with the participation of landscape architects and landscape geographers with experienced in this kind of survey. In the second stage the assessment materials were amended and finalised in cooperation with the local communities relying on their „local knowledge”. Totally, 118 landscape assets were surveyed and documented. Using the knowledge of locals, the number of valuable landscape elements was raised by 28%. Combining expert’s and local knowledge brought several „hidden” and „lost” landscape assets to light. These valuable landscape elements were recorded in the registers after joint site visits.

In the winter of 2014, in the second stage of surveying unique landscape assets of Hetés, “Winter's evening discussions” were organised on 10 occasions to involve local people. On the meetings, the methodology of surveying unique landscape assets and the importance of their preservation, as well as the greenways’ methodology were introduced to locals. These informal discussions were very useful for landscape analysis and planning, as well as for community building.

The „Fabulous Hetés” Landscape Walks were launched for the locals and all interested parties. On this field walks not only valuable landscape elements were presented, but it also promoted community building and deepened the connections between landscape and local communities.

On the Hungarian side of the border, settlement planning instruments underwent a detailed assessment and analysis with the unique landscape assets in mind, based on which a proposal was drawn up for the integration of unique landscape assets into the documentation of settlement planning.



„Fabulous Hetés” Landscape Walk (Photo: Andrea BEDŐ, Bödeháza, Hungary)

Linking the surveyed valuable landscape assets of Hetés, a greenway was established. This path system was established for hikers and cyclists, and it enables the sustainable use of these landscape features for tourism. Today, Fabulous Hetés Greenway is becoming known more and more, and hopefully it can have a role in the healthy development of the area in the future.

Participatory planning of a greenway proved to be a good tool for mobilizing local people and building community, and this way it can contribute to preserving landscape heritage of a region.

For helping the sustainable use of valuable landscape elements, a map showing both sides of the transboundary landscape of Hetés was compiled in the frame of the application programme. This map contains the routes of the greenway system connecting the unique landscape assets of the area.

This map was edited with the financial support of the South East Europe Transnational Cooperation Programme in the frame of the EuroVelo 13 – Iron Curtain Trail project.

This pilot programme can be a model for other similar assessment and protection programmes related to unique landscape assets.

Conclusions

Cooperation facilitates the development of a common vision for the region that helps to protect nature and landscapes in Slovenia and Hungary in a more integrated way. Transboundary cooperation facilitates the exchange of experiences and ideas between people across borders, both at formal and informal levels, which also increases trust among people. Another important benefit of transboundary cooperation is that young, educated people get the chance to work and stay in the region. However, challenge remains for the future, such as how to develop a common cross border management plan that can integrate nature and landscape protection goals with the sustainable development of the region and the wellbeing of local communities. This is especially important due to the varying status and capacities of the protected areas and the need to comply with the requirements of Natura 2000 network and other EU policies. Another future challenge for transboundary cooperation relates to joint spatial and urban planning in border municipalities together with impact assessment and monitoring.

Main needs and challenges:

- There is a need to create a common vision for the region that helps to protect nature and landscapes;
- There is a need for joint awareness raising and actions on reconciling various environmental interests in the area (agriculture, tourism, nature conservation and cultural heritage) in order to protect biodiversity, the natural values and in the meantime use their endogenous potential in a responsible and environment-respective way;
- There is a need to improve the tourism-related transport infrastructure, to create the conditions for tourist-friendly means of transportation (hiking, bicycle route, horse riding networks, water tourism);
- There is a need to address high unemployment rates, especially in the rural areas, and support access of vulnerable groups to labor market by providing alternative opportunities for job creation;
- There is a need to promote entrepreneurship/self-employment on local level;
- There is an underutilized natural and cultural potential in the rural areas to be valorized in sustainable tourism through cooperation within these areas and with magnets, resulting in integrated and harmonized actions;
- There is a need for the promotion of a joint regional tourism “brand” by harmonized product/service development.

The Hungarian and Slovenian transboundary and cross border cooperation of almost 20 years is a good foundation for continuing work on additional projects and activities on the small and the large scale as well in the frame of nature protection and ecosystem stability. Future cooperation based on past experiences in a widely branched partnership network is the best assurance for a stable, sustainable, social and economically fair, healthy and nature friendly development. The example of Hetés well proves that in some historical periods the country's borders can isolate neighboring communities, but based on the landscape relations the common identity provides new impetus to the community-building.

Source:¹ Borderless cooperation of local communities for the landscape heritage of “Fabulous” Hetés in Hungarian application of EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION, LANDSCAPE AWARD OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 4th Edition – 2014-2015