

BALKAN NATURE TALKS CONFERENCE REPORT

10th & 11th October 2024, Vienna, Austria



Acronyms and abbreviations

ADC	Austrian Development Cooperation
CCA	Common Country Analysis
COP	Conference of Parties
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
ESG	Environmental, social, and governance
ETS	Emissions Trading System
EU	European Union
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
GBFF	Global Biodiversity Framework Fund
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IBC	Issue Based Coalition
IFIs	International financial institutions
IPLCs	Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
LDN	Land Degradation Neutrality
MEAs	Multilateral Environmental Agreements
MESPI	Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning and Infrastructure of Kosovo*
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
SEE	Southeast Europe
UNCBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
UNCCD	Convention to Combat Desertification
UNCTs	UN Country Teams
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP ROE	United Nations Environment Programme Regional Office for Europe
UNFCCC	Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UN RCO	UN Resident Coordinator office
UNSDCF	UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
WB	Western Balkans
WB CPP	Western Balkans Climate Proofing/ Adaptation Platform
WHO	World Health Organization

Background

The **Balkan Nature Talks Conference**, held in Vienna on 10th and 11th October 2024, brought together approximately 80 participants from the Western Balkans subregion as well as international partners to discuss and address biodiversity conservation in one of Europe's most ecologically rich regions. Participants included **governments representatives, Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) and Global Environment Facility (GEF) focal points, international community, and UN Resident Coordinator offices**, who engaged in knowledge exchange on effective biodiversity conservation practices.

With its diverse natural habitats, including karst landscapes, lakes, rivers, and high levels of endemic species, the **Western Balkans represents a critical area for biodiversity within the European green belt**. However, the region is increasingly under threat from rapid urbanization, degradation, climate change, and pollution, highlighting the necessity for coordinated regional action and accelerated efforts toward implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). The conference aimed to **advance biodiversity conservation** across the region by discussing global and regional trends, tools, and innovative strategies for protecting ecosystems and wildlife. The event also focused on reviewing progress toward aligning National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) with the ambitious targets of the GBF, adopted in 2022, as well as experience exchange with initiatives within Central Asia.

Participants were briefed on the ongoing **challenges of implementing and enforcing** biodiversity conservation policies in the Western Balkans, but also highlighted successful cooperation practices and sustainable management initiatives. By showcasing examples of effective biodiversity conservation actions, the conference underlined the importance of regional and cross-border cooperation in addressing shared environmental challenges. Discussions also addressed the role of innovative actions and tools in improving conservation outcomes.

Another important point of the event was exploring **funding opportunities** to support biodiversity conservation efforts in the region. Participants discussed various financial mechanisms and resources, emphasizing the need to close the biodiversity finance gap to achieve the ambitious goals set by the GBF. Engaging with donors and international partners, the conference aimed to create pathways for mobilizing resources and ensuring long-term sustainability of biodiversity projects in the Western Balkans.

Finally, the conference actively engaged with UN Resident Coordinator offices (RCOs) to discuss the integration of **nature and biodiversity conservation** into the new **Common Country Analysis (CCA)** and **UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF)** cycles. This engagement aimed to ensure that biodiversity considerations are embedded in the broader development agenda, further supporting efforts to safeguard the region's invaluable ecosystems and contribute to global biodiversity goals.

Introductory remarks

Mr. Arnold Kreilhuber, Director of the UNEP Europe Office,

- Emphasized and welcomed the diverse attendees at the Balkan Nature Talks, which included representatives from the Western Balkans, Resident Coordinator Offices, the international community, and biodiversity conservation stakeholders.
- Conference's goal of discussing current trends, policies, and practices promoting biodiversity conservation, with a focus on the interconnectedness between biodiversity and issues like human health.
- The timing of the conference was noted, as it followed the adoption of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) at COP15 in Montreal and preceded COP16 in Cali, Colombia. This provided an opportunity to assess progress and ensure the Western Balkans' concerns were represented in future negotiations.
- Reaffirmed UNEP's commitment to biodiversity conservation, integrating it into its medium-term strategy, which is supported by various multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).
- The conference aimed to foster collaborative efforts among participants to address the region's biodiversity conservation needs and to promote sustainable ecosystem management in the Western Balkans with an overarching aim of enhancement of protection and sustainable management of the invaluable ecosystems in the region.

Mr. Harald Egerer, Head of the UNEP Vienna Program Office

- Emphasized the office's long-standing commitment to biodiversity conservation in the Western Balkans and Carpathian regions.
- Highlighted UNEP Vienna office's role in providing secretariat support for the Carpathian Convention, leading efforts for the Western Balkans, and managing the global UNEP Mountains Program.
- Despite challenges, noted the progress made in regional biodiversity cooperation over the past 15 years, balancing the protection of biodiversity with addressing threats like pollution, habitat degradation, and ecosystem fragmentation.
- With support from the GEF and bilateral donors, including Austria and Italy, UNEP had successfully facilitated the establishment of 14 new protected areas in the region over the past decade.
- Recognized the strong engagement of stakeholders at the conference, underscoring their commitment to ongoing conservation efforts in the Western Balkans.
- Highlighted UNEP's continued dedication to enhancing regional cooperation and achieving biodiversity conservation goals in the region.

Session 1: Global and Regional actions on Biodiversity

The session reinforced UNEP's commitment to biodiversity conservation and the One Health approach, particularly in the Western Balkans. Participants discussed the need for further collaboration, financial mobilization, and the integration of biodiversity into national strategies to address the intertwined challenges of environmental protection and public health. The session emphasized the importance of regional cooperation, policy alignment, and sustainable practices to ensure long-term biodiversity conservation.

The session provided an insightful overview of UNEP's ongoing initiatives in the Western Balkans, the UNEP Programme of Work and UNEP's role in global biodiversity efforts on Biodiversity Conservation and One Health.

Mr Thierry Lucas, Regional Programme Coordinator for Biodiversity at UNEP ROE, presented a summary of biodiversity conservation activities, emphasizing the importance of sustainable management of ecosystems for both human and environmental health. He highlighted the extensive portfolio of conservation projects managed by UNEP, with a total of 160 projects worldwide and additional initiatives in the pipeline. These projects focus on ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation, and enhancing resilience, especially through the involvement of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs).

Mr Pablo Sagrado Martin, Associate One Health Officer, outlined UNEP's role in the global One Health approach, which integrates environmental considerations into health strategies. He stressed that addressing environmental drivers is key to preventing future health risks, such as pandemics and discussed UNEP's collaboration with partners like WHO to develop practical tools and guidance for countries to implement One Health strategies. The Nature for Health initiative, funded by multiple partners, was highlighted as a major effort to prevent health crises by tackling environmental risks.

Ms Iskra Stojanova, UNEP Western Balkans Projects Coordinator, provided an update on key UNEP projects in the region. She detailed the organization's efforts in pollution control, sustainable land management, and biodiversity conservation across several Western Balkan countries. UNEP's work includes

assisting countries in meeting international environmental conventions such as the CBD, UNFCCC, and UNCCD. Ms Stojanova emphasized the regional cooperation projects between Albania and North Macedonia, which are crucial for ecosystem restoration and transboundary biodiversity conservation.

Mr Ersin Esen, Programme Management Officer at UNEP, presented an update on the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF), established to support the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal GBF, noting that, while progress in establishing the fund has been rapid, with multiple

projects already selected for funding, the available resources still fall short of what is needed to meet the ambitious biodiversity targets set for 2030. Mr Esen emphasized the importance of securing more contributions from developed countries to ensure the success of the GBF's long-term goals.

Funding frameworks available for countries:

- **Global Biodiversity Framework Fund** - Supports countries in achieving the goals of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by enhancing national biodiversity management, planning, policy, governance, and finance strategies. Ratified by 186 countries, the fund was officially launched at the Seventh GEF Assembly in Vancouver in August 2023. The 1st GBFF Council Meeting in February 2024 initiated programming, allocating \$211 million from confirmed pledges by countries. <https://www.thegef.org/what-we-do/topics/global-biodiversity-framework-fund>
- **Kunming Biodiversity Fund** - Established in May 2024 to advance the targets of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) to support the protection of biodiversity in developing countries for future generations. Amount/Duration: around 200 million USD (May 2024 - May 2034, 10 years), <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/kbf00>

The discussion on mainstreaming biodiversity into the CCA and Cooperation Frameworks, led by Ms Marika Palosaari, Programme Coordinator, UNEP ROE, focused on the UN's Common Approach to Biodiversity. Ms Palosaari outlined how UNEP and its partners are working to integrate biodiversity into broader UN cooperation frameworks, emphasizing the need for coordinated, cross-sectoral efforts. The session also touched on the Issue-Based Coalition (IBC) on Environment and Climate Change, which aims to translate global environmental policies into actionable strategies at the national and regional levels.

Mr Marv Barbullushi, Expert on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, presented on the status of the Green Agenda's in the Western Balkans implementation. He highlighted the progress made since the Sofia Declaration of 2020, with a focus on the five key pillars, including decarbonization, sustainable agriculture, and biodiversity protection. While there has been significant regional cooperation, Mr Barbullushi noted challenges in ensuring uniform progress across all Western Balkan countries and emphasized the importance of continuous collaboration to meet the region's biodiversity goals.

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia are moving forward with their biodiversity national targets alignment, though financial limitations remain a concern. Serbia is enhancing regional cooperation through the Green Agenda and expanding its network of protected areas. Montenegro is facing project coordination delays.

Kosovo is making strides in integrating biodiversity into its broader development goals, despite resource constraints and the lack of funding.*

UNEP, IUCN, and other key organizations continue to offer support, particularly focusing on mountain ecosystems and regional initiatives like the Carpathian Convention. The session emphasized the importance of collaboration, setting realistic biodiversity targets, fostering transboundary partnerships to enhance conservation efforts.

Session 2: Alignment process of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans with the Global Biodiversity Framework

The second session was focused on aligning National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) with the GBF in the Western Balkans. Tanya McGregor, from UNEP, highlighted the Early Action Support initiative aimed at fast-tracking the preparation and implementation of the GBF. This project, covering 138 countries, including the Western Balkans, addresses the gaps between national biodiversity frameworks and the GBF's ambitious targets. UNEP, in collaboration with UNDP and the Global Environment Facility, provides financial and technical support to ensure smoother alignment and progress, despite challenges like delays due to COVID-19.

Country presentations followed.

Albania	<p>Ms Klodiana Marika, Ministry of Tourism and Environment</p> <p>Albania is committed to the CBD and the European Green Deal, evidenced by expanding its protected areas to cover 21.4% of its territory. The country is aligning its national biodiversity targets with the GBF, supported by initiatives like the EU Nature project and the upcoming EU Forest program. Despite these efforts, Albania faces challenges in securing sufficient financial resources to implement the Nature subsector of Chapter 27, which requires substantial investment. Additionally, Albania advocates for stronger regional cooperation, particularly in standardizing monitoring systems for habitats and species.</p>
Bosnia and Herzegovina	<p>Ms Adla Kahrić, Federal Ministry of Environment and Tourism</p> <p>BiH completed its NBSAP for 2015–2020 and is now addressing gaps to better align its targets with the GBF. The country has designated an NGO consortium - the Forestry and Environmental Action and the Center for Energy, Environment, and Resources as the executive agency for Early Action Grants project (EAG). Despite delays in contracts, the process is progressing with continued meetings and expert involvement, reflecting a strong commitment to the work. Optimism remains high that these challenges will be resolved soon. The national target, particularly Target 19, has already been submitted to the Secretariat. The country is focused on expediting the update of its NBSAP and preparation of the 7th National report, with proposal for the same modality for execution.</p>
Montenegro	<p>Ms Arina Maraš, Ministry of Ecology, Spatial Planning and Urbanism</p> <p>Actively engaged in UNEP’s Early Action Program, launched in 2023. Despite delays in appointing a project coordinator and starting the NBSAP drafting, the country is firmly committed to achieving the GBF targets. Key projects are focused on integrating biodiversity into tourism and agriculture, restoring ecosystems, and developing a Red List of species alongside new nature protection laws. Montenegro is also making efforts in reducing pollution and addressing climate change, supported by strong legal frameworks.</p>
North Macedonia	<p>Mr Vlatko Trpeski, Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning</p> <p>Reported on administrative challenges in coordinating with UNEP Nairobi, which have delayed the implementation of its EAG project. However, the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning has significantly increased financial support for biodiversity protection in 2024. The country has recently expanded its protected areas to 13.9% of its territory, including the designation of National Park Shar Mountain and other nature parks. North Macedonia is also actively working on identifying Natura 2000 sites and updating its NBSAP in alignment with the GBF.</p>
Serbia	<p>Ms Jelena Dučić, Ministry of Environmental Protection</p>

	<p>Serbia has been working on aligning its biodiversity goals with the GBF and has initiated the development of a new Nature Protection Programme. With 472 protected areas covering around 8.66% of its territory and significant progress in identifying potential Natura 2000 sites, Serbia continues to strengthen its regional cooperation through the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the Biodiversity Task Force for the region. Upcoming initiatives include drafting new legislation and enhancing ecological networks, while projects such as GEF/UNDP/BIOFIN support the implementation of biodiversity goals.</p>
Kosovo*	<p>Ms Miradije Gërguri and Ms Nexhmije Kamberi, Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning and Infrastructure (MESPI)</p> <p>Kosovo faces significant challenges in advancing biodiversity conservation, particularly due to the absence of ratified international agreements. Despite these obstacles, the country is in the process of developing its second NBSAP for 2024-2033, which aims to integrate biodiversity objectives with economic, social, and cultural development. Efforts are being made to align with the GBF and to implement the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. While there has been progress in transposing the Habitats Directive, the designation of Natura 2000 sites is still in its beginning. Additionally, Kosovo* struggles with limited financial resources, inadequate technical capacity, and staffing shortages within its nature conservation institutions.</p>

Ms Tanya McGregor, UNEP, emphasized the organization's commitment to supporting countries in their biodiversity initiatives through a global inception workshop at COP16 and an NBSAP-focused

event. UNEP is actively working to finalize contracts for experts and resolve the issue of delayed payments, which has adversely affected team morale. Their efforts demonstrate a strong dedication to providing the necessary assistance for advancing biodiversity conservation.

Ms Genevieve Schmoeker, UNEP, highlighted the critical role of mountain ecosystems, which support a significant portion of the world's biodiversity and provide essential resources to over 1.1 billion people. She stressed the need for urgent action to protect these vulnerable areas from climate change and biodiversity loss. UNEP, in collaboration with international partners, is driving initiatives like the Global Biodiversity Assessment and the Vanishing Treasures program, which focuses on mitigating human-wildlife conflict in mountain regions. The program is expanding to new regions, targeting species like the Jaguar and Spectacled Bear, aligning with the goals of the GBF.

Ms Elena Fischer, UNEP Vienna-SCC presented the Carpathian Convention, a multilateral governance framework established to protect the unique biodiversity of the Carpathian Mountains. The convention facilitates cooperation among seven countries and addresses key issues such as sustainable tourism, biodiversity, and climate change adaptation. Fischer emphasized the importance of aligning the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework with global biodiversity goals, particularly the post-2020 GBF. The framework aims to translate international commitments into regional actions, focusing on the sustainable development of the Carpathian region by 2050.

Ms Milica Miskovic, IUCN ECARO, discussed the role of the Biodiversity Task Force for the Western Balkans established to enhance regional cooperation on biodiversity issues. The task force serves as a technical and advisory body under the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and works closely with the IUCN's Eastern Europe and Central Asia office. One of its key challenges is developing appropriate indicators for biodiversity monitoring and evaluation at the regional level. Recently, the task force secured funding for new projects, including one supported by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC), aimed at implementing the biodiversity pillar of the Green Agenda.

The session concluded with a focus on the importance of realistic and manageable targets for biodiversity conservation in the Western Balkans, especially considering the EU's new restoration law. Participants emphasized the need for strong collaboration on national and regional projects that support the Western Balkan Restoration Plan and enhance the visibility of biodiversity conservation efforts. The meeting also touched on the potential for transboundary partnerships in the Carpathians, particularly regarding parks in the Eastern Carpathians, and encouraged ongoing dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders moving forward.

The session highlighted the growing challenges of biodiversity conservation and climate change impacts. Germany emphasized its strong collaboration with UNEP and local governments, particularly focusing on addressing biodiversity protection and climate risks. Projects like the CAMCA are using climate-informed management to enhance resilience, with lessons being applied in the WB, where structured risk analyses and capacity building are essential. Discussions underscored the need for stakeholder involvement, especially in developing ecological corridors and protected areas. Key challenges, such as forest fires, illegal logging, and water scarcity, are being addressed through international partnerships and the involvement of local communities. The session concluded with a focus on enhancing enforcement measures, improving biodiversity monitoring, and fostering collaboration on climate resilience and DRR.

Session 3: Inception of the project “Experience Exchange between Central Asia and Western Balkan on climate change informed wildlife conservation and ecosystem-based adaptation

Mr Nils Wortberg, Policy Officer, German Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection, emphasized Germany's strong collaboration with UNEP and the Western Balkans on biodiversity and climate initiatives, including the new Low-Earth Biodiversity Programme and the International Climate Initiative. He highlighted the region's unique ecosystems, such as the Narta Lagoon, while also addressing challenges like habitat destruction due to human activities and climate change. The Ministry hopes lessons learned from Central Asia can be applied to improve biodiversity protection and climate mitigation efforts in the Western Balkans.

The CAMCA Project, presented by Mr Maarten Hofmann, Associate Programme Management Officer, and Mr Azamat Usupbekov, Project Coordinator, aims to conserve migratory mammal species in Central Asia through climate-informed management, focusing on protected areas and surrounding communities. It addresses the impacts of development on wildlife and ecosystems, while fostering sustainable coexistence. By integrating climate data into grazing and development plans, the project seeks to enhance resilience to climate change, with the involvement of local and regional stakeholders. UNEP is leading the initiative, working closely with partners and relevant ministries across three countries. Mr Usupbekov discussed the importance of developing ecological corridors in Kyrgyzstan, focusing on integrating pasture management with wildlife conservation. He emphasized the necessity of including all stakeholders, such as local municipalities and hunting associations, in the design and management of these corridors. Ecosystem-based adaptation strategies are also being developed to enhance local community resilience to climate change while promoting sustainable practices in the region.

Ms Sonja Gebert discussed a related initiative in the Western Balkans, focusing on transboundary protected areas and applying lessons from Central Asia. This project includes assessing the implementation of Chapter

27 of the EU Environmental Acquis and building capacity for ecosystem restoration and climate resilience. Climate modeling tools developed over several years are being used to forecast future climate scenarios, enabling better management plans in protected areas, and fostering collaboration among regional stakeholders.

Session emphasized issues in the Western Balkans region such as forest fires, water scarcity, and conflicts between local communities and nature conservation efforts were raised. There was consensus on the need for structured risk analyses and capacity building to address climate impacts, with several UN agencies already involved in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and nature protection. Participants stressed the importance of integrating local data and engaging communities in developing management strategies that are climate-informed and sustainable.

The discussion on climate change impacts and protected area management in various national parks across the Balkans and Central Asia raised several pressing concerns.

Mr. Brezarevic, Tara National Park noted the lack of climate change studies and the shift in forest management, with sanitation cutting increasing to over 50%. In Drina National Park, Mr. Zivanovic emphasized the severity of forest fires, exacerbated by climate change, especially in areas housing rare species like the Panciceva omorika. Mr. Lalic, Prokletije National Park highlighted the conflicts between local communities and the forestry agency, stressing the climate-related risks like forest fires and snow loss due to rising temperatures. Ms. Anela Stavreska, Shar National Park detailed the integration of climate change measures into their management plan, using tools like the IECM and Open Standard method. The park is already involved in projects with UNDP to address DRR, particularly focusing on issues like forest fires, water scarcity, and landslides. She stressed the need for new water management strategies, given the scarcity faced by villages below the mountains, despite abundant water sources at higher altitudes of the mountain. .

Mr. Dejan Radošević from Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed support to UNEP initiative (CABAMCA) and that the Institute for Cultural Historic and Natural heritage of Republika Srpska, with its technical expertise, will provide essential data from national parks. Additionally, Ms. Lilian Kandikjan, RCO North Macedonia, mentioned that North Macedonia is developing its National Adaptation Plan (NAP) with the help of UNDP, and the UNEP project comes at a critical time to aid these efforts.

Mr. Kamberi, from Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning and Infrastructure of Kosovo * highlighted the importance of UNEP's project for biodiversity monitoring, which will improve the national database and help Albania meet its obligations under Chapter 27. The project will also address biodiversity research, a critical aspect of fulfilling Albania's nature conservation commitments. Meanwhile, Ms. Sonja Gebert emphasized that insurance companies in Austria are facing challenges in factoring climate risks into their pricing models for insurance policies. This difficulty arises due to the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, such as landslides, which are triggered by changing climate conditions.

Finally, in response to Ms. Kamberi's question about ecological corridor fragmentation, Mr. Azamat Usupbekov explained the early stages of developing ecological corridors. He emphasized the importance of inclusivity in corridor design, involving all stakeholders, especially protected area managers. Usupbekov stressed that data-driven approaches and stakeholder involvement are key to mitigating the impact of hydropower plants and ensuring the effective design and management of these corridors.

Mr. Damir Šaljić, RCO BiH, emphasized the importance of governmental support for conducting comprehensive risk analyses, particularly considering the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters due to climate change. He highlighted the current gap in knowledge and expertise regarding the relationship between climate change and territorial management, underlining the need for a more structured and data-driven approach to address these challenges. The floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that occurred beginning of October 2024, exemplified the urgency of developing risk analysis capabilities, as multiple factors—such as logging, construction, and climate change—contributed to the disaster. Šaljić reiterated Bosnia's commitment to improving its strategies and gathering the necessary knowledge to better inform future decisions on climate resilience and DRR.

The TRATOLOW project, focused on transitioning towards a low-emissions and climate-resilient economy in the Western Balkans and Turkey, has successfully concluded. The project targeted key areas such as climate policy, greenhouse gas inventories, the Emissions Trading System (ETS), and climate adaptation. A second regional initiative, EU4Green, presented by Ms Katharina Huchler, UBA, aims to implement the Green Agenda, with a focus on biodiversity. Funded by the EU, this project spans six pilot sites across the Western Balkans and aims to raise awareness, enhance conservation efforts, and improve biodiversity monitoring. Each site, including Korab Koritnik Nature Park (Albania) and Una River National Park (BiH), engages in fieldwork to assess conservation status, with the training of local experts being a key component.

During the discussions, Ms Sonja Gebert raised a question regarding guidelines for selecting Nature-based Solutions (NbS) within the EU4Green. Ms Katharina Huchler responded by emphasizing the importance of aligning NbS with local environmental and social contexts, ensuring they improve biodiversity and support local communities. She highlighted stakeholder engagement as crucial for the success of NbS. Additionally, Ms Milica Miskovic, IUCN, shared relevant guidelines, supporting the discussion on how to prioritize NbS to maximize ecological and societal benefits.

Mr Dragan Roganović, EPA, inquired about the project's status and data harmonization efforts. Ms Katharina Huchler explained that the focus is on Natura 2000 mapping, with a strong emphasis on evaluating conservation status. The project conducts expert training to utilize indicator assessments, which will contribute to a robust methodology tailored to the region. She expressed optimism that the methodologies developed under the project will benefit conservation efforts across the Western Balkans.

The discussion also covered environmental crime, with Ms Lejda Toci, UNODC, outlining recurring challenges such as vulnerable supply chains, weak enforcement, and corruption. She mentioned that Western Balkan countries have not submitted several recent illegal trade reports, highlighting gaps in enforcement. Ms Lillian Kandikjan and Ms Lorenza Jachia, RCO Serbia, discussed human rights to a healthy environment and the importance of ensuring that environmental initiatives are meaningful to people, while Mr Trpeski shared a success story about customs control capacity building and educational activities leading to improved enforcement in North Macedonia.

Ms Ajla Kahrić, BiH, expressed concerns about the lack of data and emphasized the importance of the role of environmental defenders and aligning the issue and activities with obligations under the CBD. Mr Dejan Radosevic, BiH, emphasized that designating protected areas alone is insufficient to protect biodiversity, particularly given the increasing threat of illegal activities and natural disasters, such as the recent floods in BiH. Ms Toci responded by encouraging collaboration with UNODC to address these challenges and ensure the necessary financial support for concrete actions.

In conclusion, Ms Anela Stavrevska Panajotova, Shar National Park, discussed the importance of ranger services in combating illegal logging and wildlife trafficking. She shared the success of the park's ranger service, which has benefited from global conservation assistance and upgraded to the Smart connect system, offering advanced tools for law enforcement and conservation efforts. This model could potentially be expanded to other countries in the region.

The session emphasized the critical role of financial tools and mechanisms in integrating biodiversity into national finance strategies. Collaboration between ministries of finance and environment was highlighted as essential for aligning countries' biodiversity financing with CBD commitments. Long-term financing models for protected areas, such as the Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust's project, showcased efforts toward self-sustainability in managing large-scale ecosystems. Ecosystem service valuation was presented as a key method for sustainable land management, with case studies like North Macedonia's GEF6 offering practical insights. Participants agreed on the importance of integrating ecosystem services into decision-making processes and addressing challenges such as drought and floods risks, particularly in BiH. Stronger collaboration between countries and international organizations to overcome the practical challenges of biodiversity conservation is needed.

Session 4: Tools and mechanisms for biodiversity conservation

Session focused on tools and mechanisms for biodiversity conservation. Ms Tracey Cumming, Senior Technical Advisor for BIOFIN at UNDP, gave an overview of how BIOFIN facilitates country-level integration of biodiversity into finance strategies. She highlighted the importance of direct collaboration between ministries of finance and environment, supported by a global team that guides these efforts. The session underscored the value of engaging governments in reporting biodiversity expenditures and financing plans as part of their commitments to the CBD financial framework.

Questions from Ms Stavrevska Panajotova and Ms Kandikjan focused on whether the studies included hydropower subsidies and Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting, with Ms Cumming clarifying that the strategy is tailored to country-specific priorities, though hydropower should be considered in these discussions.

Ms Mirjam de Koning, Executive Director of the Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust, discussed efforts to enhance the management effectiveness of protected areas, aiming for self-sustainability through long-term financing and transformation of the PA system covering over 400,000 hectares. The project seeks to transition from project-driven management to self-managed systems, adhering to European and international standards. Ms Kamberi from MESPI, Kosovo, inquired about the expansion of these projects to Kosovo and Montenegro, to which Ms de Koning responded that a formal request from the governments of these countries would be needed for a feasibility study.

Ms Katerina Atanasovska, Macedonian Ecological Society, presented a case study on ecosystem service valuation within the GEF6 Project in North Macedonia. This study offered insights into valuing ecosystem services as a tool for sustainable land management, highlighting the importance of incorporating these valuations into broader environmental planning.

Mr Salman Hussain, Programme Management Officer UNEP, addressed the broader challenges and opportunities in ecosystem services valuation. He emphasized the need for integrating ESG into decision-making processes at all levels, presenting this as a critical opportunity for governments to address environmental degradation.

Mr Mirza Hujic from Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of BiH, added to the discussion by mentioning the importance of assessing drought risks and agricultural impacts in Bosnia and Herzegovina's National Action Plan, emphasizing the role of statistical data and risk analysis, particularly through tools like WB CPP.

Main conclusions

- The severe flooding and landslides in Bosnia and Herzegovina have caused extensive destruction and significant loss of life, highlighting an urgent need for regional cooperation and increased assistance. Immediate mobilization of resources and international support is crucial to mitigate the devastation and ensure timely relief efforts. **Risk and vulnerability assessment is the next activity to be considered for BiH under the WB CPP project (for start) as well as conducting evidence-based risk assessments across all sectors. Understanding the future impacts of climate change and integrating related risks into land-use planning are essential. The RCO of BiH has expressed a strong interest in advancing these efforts.**
- The German Federal Ministry of Environment is extending its support to UNEP in assessing the impact of climate change on biodiversity in the Western Balkans, with a commitment **to continue backing efforts related to Pillar 5 of the Green Deal for Western Balkans.**
- Further **alignment with the EIA and SEA Directives** in the WB economies is necessary to facilitate infrastructure investments, enhance public participation, and strengthen enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.
- **Implementation of the Chapter 27 of the EU accession process remains costly and resource-intensive**, while countries are making strides in transposing environmental legislation.
- The meeting emphasized the need to **strengthen environmental regulations, including Nature Impact Assessments aligned with the EU Habitats and Birds Directives**, informed spatial planning, and better enforcement of the polluter-pays principle and environmental liability.

Main conclusions

- Enhanced international and regional cooperation is crucial in **addressing environmental crime** in the Western Balkans.
- **Habitat and species restoration as well as biodiversity monitoring has been increasingly highlighted** as a priority for the region, along with the need to **mainstream biodiversity into other sectors** like transport, agriculture, and spatial planning.
- **Administrative challenges** in the implementation of the **Early Action Grants in the WB** region noted, and efforts are underway to overcome these obstacles.
- One of the priorities for the region should be **enhancement of the role of environmental defenders**, aligning this issue with obligations **under the CBD**, and enhancing administrative capacities for inspectors, judges, and prosecutors.
- Public awareness of **environmental crime** should be raised, and challenges such as hydro-power plants, illegal logging, hunting, and waste management should be addressed.
- **Joint dialogues** with international organizations, such as PONT and Global Conservancy, are essential for aligning and continuing collective efforts in the Western Balkans.
- **UNEP's non-resident status presents challenges** in delivering support on the ground, yet the needs of the countries remain pressing.
- **Conferences like the Balkan Nature Talks are vital for advancing relevant initiatives** in collaboration with governments, institutions, the international community, and RCOs in the region.
- Conference documents/ presentations are available at:
<https://www.unep.org/events/conference/balkan-nature-talks-conference>