

## Marketing activities as a part of agrobiodiversity conservation efforts in the Stara Planina Mt. area

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The West Balkan Mountain Range, situated on the (south-eastern) border of Serbia and Bulgaria, is known in both countries as “Stara Planina”. It is part of the Balkan Mountains Biodiversity Center, which is one of six temperate centers of biodiversity in Europe. It is known for its rich biological and geological diversity as well as its cultural heritage. In 1996 the Governments of Bulgaria and Serbia signed a memorandum of agreement to work towards the creation of a trans-boundary Stara Planina Peace Park. While the establishment of the trans-boundary park has not yet been achieved, in 1997, the GoS established the Stara Planina Nature Park (SPNP) on an area covering 142,220 ha. The SPNP, which falls under Category V<sup>1</sup> within the IUCN PA categorization system, qualifies as “natural resource of the utmost importance” under Serbian law. The Government of Serbia is in the process of preparing a proposal for the SPNP to be designated as a Biosphere Reserve under the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program. A proposal to establish a Nature Park on the Bulgarian side is currently under the review by the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water.

The park presents a great variety of landscapes, habitats, natural phenomena and rural cultural heritage. Apart from fifty-two plant communities and a rich variety of wild animal- and plant species, SPNP is home to unique rural communities and indigenous farm animal breeds. This region had in the past relatively strong rural economy based on sheep and goat dairy products and livestock production used to be functional part of SPNP agro-ecological landscape. Indigenous sheep, goat, cattle flocks and traditional extensive farming systems shaped for centuries the valleys, meadows, pastures, forests and the culture of the various Balkan ethnic groups in this Mountain. The meat and dairy products of those breeds are part of the tradition and have very high value because of their excellent nutritional qualities. Some of the SPNP Mountain dairies (“mandra”) still produce traditional, autochthonous cheese (Kachkaval, urda, belmuz...). Zackel sheep wool used to be basis for the carpeting in Chiprovci (Bulgaria) and Pirot (Serbia) area. But lack of local development strategies; continuing migration to urban centers and unsatisfactory age structure resulted in a slowly collapse of traditional rural economy, decrease of animal production, land abandonment, slowly disappearing of cultural heritage; agricultural indigenous knowledge and agrobiodiversity declining. Abandonment of mountain pastures has resulted in natural succession and invasion of many mountain grasslands by junipers and other shrubs and the loss or decline of a number of economically important species, including alpine and sub-alpine communities of *Poion violaceae* and *Seslerion coerulantis*, and populations of *Gentianella bulgarica*, *Crocus veluchensis*, *Lilium jankae*, *Campanula moesiaca*, *Thymus vandasii*, *Hypochoeris maculata ssp. pelivanoviczii*, *Achillea lingulata* and others. This has proved the so called “non marketable” importance of autochthonous sheep, cattle and goat flocks for protection of valuable grassland communities from undesirable phytocenotic changes. Indigenous breed’s ability to use mountain coarse forages of low nutritional value should be treated as advantage, as well their special quality products. The mutual impact of the environment and the genetic composition of breeds and the use of certain species is highest in the extensive grazing and

the mixed farming systems that used to be traditional characteristic of Stara Planina Mountain.

Main problems causing further decline of Stara Planina indigenous breeds are: inbreeding and further decline of valuable genetic material and the diversity in the genotypes of livestock species; systematical and unsystematical crossing; decreasing interest of local farmers for animal breeding; lack of functional local and national mechanisms for implementing conservation programmes for the indigenous breeds (caused by financial limitations) and lack of promotional and marketing initiatives able to increase the value of indigenous breeds products and activities.

The table below shows remaining autochthonous breeds in the SPNP

<b>Species</b>	<b>Name of the breed or strain</b>	<b>State indicator in Serbia</b>
Horses	<i>Domestic Mountain Pony</i>	<i>Critical- maintained</i>
Donkeys	<i>Balkan Donkey</i>	<i>Endangered</i>
Cattle	<i>Busha</i>	<i>Disappearing type</i>
Goat	<i>Balkan Goat</i>	<i>Endangered - maintained</i>
Sheep	<i>Pirot Zackel</i>	<i>Endangered</i>
	<i>Svrljig Zackel</i>	<i>Not at risk</i>
	<i>Bardoka Zackel</i>	<i>Endangered - maintained</i>
	<i>Karakachan Zackel</i>	<i>Endangered</i>
Pigs	<i>Mangalitza</i>	<i>Endangered-maintained</i>
	<i>Moravka</i>	<i>Endangered</i>
Poultry	<i>Svrljig hen breed</i>	<i>Endangered</i>

Marketing of indigenous breeds' products and their environmental services is becoming very important tool in agrobiodiversity conservation. There are several initiatives in the area of Stara Planina Mt. which use marketing tools in raising public interest for local breeds conservation:

1. **“Natura Balkanika” Nature Society** program of on-farm conservation of endangered Serbian autochthonous domestic animals breeds is conducted in cooperation with Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management (MAFWM) and local farmers in Dimitrovgrad area. Activities in the project are: identification and registration of individuals of endangered breeds; supporting several farms and providing of various forms of on-farm support and investment; setting up of functional production-processing-marketing-tourist farm models; farmer's consultations and providing of adequate literature and organization of promotional events and continuous media campaign. The public awareness and consumer's interest for indigenous breed's products is gradually growing thanks to the continual promotion Natura Balkanika is conducting through its Interactive farm and “Regional Fair of Balkan Agrobiodiversity and Rural Heritage”. Natura Balkanika's Interactive farm poses 5 collections of Serbian indigenous breeds and have launched traditional carpeting course based on zackel wool, “riding school” using Domestic Mountain Pony, playground, farm-shop, ethno room and other show-activities in aim to reach their economic valorization and attract young population to visit it. The Farm also has accommodation capacities. “Natura Balkanika” is one of the leading actors in organizing manifestation “Regional Fair of Balkan Agrobiodiversity and Rural Heritage”, every year in September, when many Balkan breeds are being exposed to the national and regional public. This event is attracting more and more public interest which is causing increase of consumers and farmers interest for endangered breeds and their products. In 2006, Natura Balkanika prepared tourist trails for horse riding, linking several traditional

rural households in the Stara Planina area, breeding indigenous breeds and having knowledge to present traditional products made of this breeds. Horses which are used for horse back riding are Domestic Mountain Pony and Nonius, breeds which are endangered in Serbia. This NGO plans to use karakachan sheep wool for knitting traditional wool socks. The socks will have a label explaining origin of the wool and karakachan sheep, information about the farm they are breed on, and information about the Stara Planina Mt. In the beginning of 2008, this NGO will prepare very limited quantity (only 50 pairs of wool socks), but the plan for 2008 is more ambitious.

2. ***Serbian Transitional Agriculture Reform Project*** is planning to link rare breeds conservation activities with the Nature Park biodiversity conservation and combine it with actions aiming to support rural revival and sustainable development of the area by: promoting effective use of natural resources; reducing dependency on external inputs and encouraging diversification of rural economy. A four years GEF project (in the framework of Serbia Transitional Agriculture Reform Project) is expected to start very soon. The project is going to be implemented by the MAFWM and World Bank aiming to support agrobiodiversity conservation and improve management and biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource use within the non-core conservation areas (Zones 2 and 3) of the SPNP. The project plans to support ecological restoration of grassland priority sites (particularly degraded high elevation pastures meadows) using “services” of local sheep breeds and their crossbreeds (which are robust enough to survive in mountain environment). The project will support development and certification of “Stara Planina Nature Park - branded” products based on local breeds as well as sustainable use of natural resources, incentives to male and female farmers for maintaining rare indigenous livestock breeds, small scale infrastructure to support rural/eco-tourism, and establishing an ecological monitoring system.

One of the most successful marketing activities in agrobiodiversity conservation in Serbia, is ***Special Nature Reserve “Zasavica”*** were Nature Conservation Movement from Sremska Mitrovica is breeding Mangalitza pig and Podolian Cattle. This NGO is processing mangalitza meat into a traditional sausage “Po’ metera sremske”. This product was awarded by the biggest agricultural regional fair “Novi Sad Agricultural Fair” in 2005. The product has very attractive packaging made of local trees branches.

Every indigenous breed deserves to be protected from extinction and to be treated as a valuable heritage of every country. The Stara Planina Mt. indigenous farm animal breeds should be treated as an important resource for economic development and livelihood security. Extensive genetic diversity in these breeds allows the existence of livestock in the most extreme mountain environments providing a range of traditional products and environmentally useful functions. Establishment of interactive/show farms systems able to combine rural tourism, direct marketing and small-scale processing of foodstuffs (and other products) is a good tool for increasing public interest and value of endangered farm breeds.