

# BalkanDetox LIFE Kick-off Meeting

## MEETING REPORT

# Balkan**Detox** LIFE KICK-OFF MEETING





**Organized by:**

Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF)

**Project:**

Strengthen national capacities to fight wildlife poisoning and raise awareness about the problem in the Balkan countries/BalkanDetox LIFE Project (LIFE19 GIE/NL/001016);

- This report corresponds to the deliverable under Action A.1: Kick-off meeting of the BalkanDetox LIFE project.

**Date and place of the Meeting:**

30 November 2020 | 10:00 – 16:00 CET | Zoom

**Meeting Report prepared by:**

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**Date of the report:**

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## Introduction

The Kick-off meeting of the BalkanDetox LIFE project was organized under the scope of the preparatory Action A.1 with an aim to announce and present the project to all project beneficiaries and relevant stakeholders from the Balkan Peninsula and further, and to officially mark the start of this LIFE-funded project. During the course of this meeting the project beneficiaries provided an overview of the project, its actions, and discussed the situation of wildlife poisoning in the Balkan Peninsula, focusing on the project implementation areas. The Kick-off meeting was originally foreseen to be conducted as a face-to-face meeting in one of the project countries from the Balkan Peninsula, with attendance of up to 100 participants from project teams of BalkanDetox LIFE project beneficiaries, relevant governmental institutions and other stakeholders from the seven participating Balkan countries, as well as other relevant stakeholders for combating wildlife poisoning in Europe. Due to the Covid19 preventive measures in force in each of the Balkan countries, and throughout Europe, it was not feasible to conduct such a large international event in person, so the meeting took place virtually.

## Background

The BalkanDetox LIFE project is a five-year endeavor with a €1.8 million budget, which aims to improve management of poisoning incidents and achieve significant reduction of mortality of vultures and other affected species caused by wildlife poisoning by ensuring real and continued engagement of relevant governmental authorities in combating this issue and labelling it as a socially unacceptable occurrence in the eyes of the general public across Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia by raising awareness and strengthening national capacities to fight the problem of wildlife poisoning. It is funded by the EU's LIFE Programme, and it is co-financed by the Vulture Conservation Foundation, the MAVA Foundation and Euronatur, as well as by the Whitley Fund for Nature and Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund for specific actions. Project partners are the VCF as the coordinating beneficiary, and the Albanian Ornithological Society, Association BIOM, Bird Protection and Study Society of Serbia, Fund for Wild Flora and Fauna, Hellenic Ornithological Society, Macedonian Ecological Society, Ornitološko društvo NAŠE Ptice and the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania as associated beneficiaries. Furthermore, this project relies on Spanish best practice experience in combating illegal wildlife poisoning and counts on the support from the Junta de Andalucía and the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge.

## Meeting objectives

- Presentation of the BalkanDetox LIFE project.
- Establishment of the Steering Committee for the BalkanDetox LIFE project.

- Establishment of Coordination team for the BalkanDetox LIFE project.
- Establishment of Financial team for the BalkanDetox LIFE project.
- Establishment of Communication team for the BalkanDetox LIFE project

## Target audience

Representatives for relevant governmental institutions and enforcement agencies from the Balkan Peninsula, project beneficiaries of the BalkanDetox LIFE project, national and international experts from Civil Society Organizations working in this field and staff from the different LIFE projects implementing closely related activities on this subject. The total number of registered participants was 113, while 77 participants from 18 countries attended the event.

## Meeting Agenda

The Kick-off meeting was structured into two sessions, and the agenda of the meeting is available as Annex 1.

**Session I** - focused on general presentation of the objectives, core actions and expected results of the BalkanDetox LIFE project, as well on those core components of the project for which active engagement of relevant governmental authorities is crucial. The importance of setting up official anti-poisoning working groups in each of the relevant Balkan countries, in order to secure institutional cooperation and support for combating the illegal practice of wildlife poisoning, is one of the key priorities of this project, and initial discussions towards their establishment under the BalkanDetox LIFE project were conducted with relevant attending stakeholders. Additionally, within this session all project beneficiaries presented their progress for the first two months of project implementation.

Presentation 1: Presentation of the BalkanDetox LIFE project and progress - Uroš Pantović, *Vulture Conservation Foundation*. The presentation is available as Annex 2.

Presentation 2: Progress update from each project partner - Klea Duro, *Albanian Ornithological Society*; Ledi Selgjakaj, *Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania*; Tarik Dervović, *Ornitološko društvo "Naše ptice"*; Hristo Peshev, *Fund for Wild Flora and Fauna*; Nera Fabijanić, *Association BIOM*; Victoria Saravia, *Hellenic Ornithological Society*; Nenad Petrovski, *Macedonian Ecological Society*; Aleksa Vukićević, *Bird Protection and Study Society of Serbia*. Presentations are available as Annex 3.

Presentation 3: Key multi-institutional engagement processes of the BalkanDetox LIFE project: National Anti-poisoning Working Groups, National anti-poisoning road maps, Standard Operational Protocols for wildlife poisoning, Wildlife Crime Academy - Jovan Andevski, *Vulture Conservation Foundation*. Presentation is available as Annex 4.

Presentation 4: BalkanDetox LIFE project 2021 event calendar - Uroš Pantović, *Vulture Conservation Foundation*. Presentation is available as Annex 5.



Presentation 5: Steering Committee Terms of Reference - Jovan Andevski, *Vulture Conservation Foundation*. Presentation is available as Annex 6.

### **Outcomes/Conclusions from Session 1:**

- National anti-poisoning working groups should be established from the onset of the project and for this the Life project will build on progress already achieved by project beneficiaries within the implementation of the Balkan Anti-poisoning Project (BAPP).
- Unofficial working group was not established only in Serbia, as Serbia joined the BAPP initiative with a one-and-a-half-year delay due to funding limitations.
- Capacity building of relevant staff from governmental institutions is a very important first step towards better management of poisoning incidents. Selection of candidates for the training programmes within the Wildlife Crime Academy, as well as participation in national working groups, should be done carefully in order to ensure the continued participation of motivated, committed relevant staff, as changes in job positions are common for some of the governmental institutions from the Balkans.
- It is important to establish synergies between existing training/capacity building programmes that are already implemented nationally by governmental institutions, such as the capacity building programmes that the CITES unit within The Ministry of Environmental Protection of Serbia is currently conducting for wildlife crime. Exchanging experiences and results and cooperating within the different training programmes would be beneficial for both initiatives, especially for selection of best candidates from target institutions, which would at the end ideally be specialised for handling wildlife crime incidents within those institutions.
- Collaboration and establishing synergies with other on-going Life projects being implemented in the region, such as the Egyptian Vulture New Life project, which has actions planned towards developing local networks of anti-poison stakeholders and provide some training. It is important to actively exchange information between the different Life projects to avoid duplication of activities and to cooperate with projects in order to achieve the maximum impact of complementary actions.
- Ornithela sharing platform for the data which will be provided by the 25 GPS tagged Griffon Vultures within this project is a good tool for fast exchange of data between numerous users on a regional level and, response on ground in case of a bird in distress and development of a regional network of collaborators. There is a clear advantage if vultures and other birds of prey tagged within other projects are included in this platform developed for the BalkanDetox LIFE.
- Development of standardised operational protocols, in line with best practice examples already used, for staff from relevant governmental institutions is one of the priorities in order for all the stakeholders involved to be aware of their respective role and responsibilities in managing poisoning incidents.
- Many of the actions of the BalkanDetox LIFE project comprise of physical meetings, workshops and training programmes and are therefore in potential danger of getting delayed and postponed due to Covid19 circumstances. The project team will need to carefully monitor the development of Covid19 circumstances in each country and adapt the implementation of activities accordingly, and the coordinating beneficiary

has defined an adjustment plan for 2021. So far, the implementation of the project has not been affected in a major way, although the Basic training course within the Wildlife Crime Academy was postponed for spring already.

- Dates for the training courses and regional events which require participation from governmental institutions need to be established at least 2 months, preferably 3, in advance in order that these representatives have sufficient time to acquire all necessary permits to travel from their respective institutions. With a smaller timeframe it would be difficult to guarantee participation from all relevant institutions.
- Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic challenge, Junta de Andalucía, State Environmental Inspectorate of the Republic of North Macedonia and Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine/Department of forensic and judicial veterinary medicine, University of Zagreb, Croatia have already confirmed representatives for the SC.
- Representative for the SC from Albania was selected and will be contacted to confirm participation.
- Representative for the SC from Greece has been chosen and contacted from the Ministry of Rural Development and Food and official confirmation from the authorities is pending.
- Opportunities should be explored on how to develop some of the anti-poison actions in Montenegro and include some representatives in the regional networking activities foreseen within the BalkanDetox LIFE project, as it is a country regularly visited by vultures, where illegal poisoning has been well documented several times during the past two years and not eligible for Life funding.

**Session II** - technical session regarding most important preparatory actions for administrative, financial and communications needs of the BalkanDetox LIFE project. This session was primarily structured for project beneficiaries, but all participants of the Kick-off meeting were welcome to attend.

Presentation 6: Formalization of Partnership agreements and Coordination Team - Jovan Andevski, *Vulture Conservation Foundation*. The presentation is available as Annex 7.

Presentation 7: Finance Team - Alice Gama, *Vulture Conservation Foundation*. The presentation is available as Annex 8.

Presentation 8: Communication Team - Eleni Karatzia, *Vulture Conservation Foundation*. The presentation is available as Annex 9.

## Outcomes/Conclusions from Session 2:

- Physical signing of Partnership Agreements might take more time than usual due to Covid19 restrictions and delays in postage systems.
- Partnership Agreements will be finalized and 1<sup>st</sup> instalments of Life funds will be transferred to all project associated beneficiaries until mid-December from the

Coordinating beneficiary. Contributions from the Co-financiers of the BalkanDetox LIFE will explained in details within Partnership Agreements.

- First internal technical progress report from the project coordination team's due in the first week of January 2021. Report template to be distributed to partners again.
- Project stamps to be used for invoices are sent and are on the way to all project beneficiary;
- The newly recruited Financial Assistant of the VCF will join the BalkanDetox team from the beginning of 2021.
- Financial documents from associated beneficiaries needed for financial management of the project and reporting to NEEMO are still pending and the deadline for delivery of these documents is set for the end of December.
- Financial timeframe for providing reports (filling in the excel reporting template) of 10 days will probably not be sufficient for most partners, although addition of some documents would be possible after the deadline. It is decided that we should keep the original deadline and to see if this needs adapting after the first reporting period.
- BalkanDetox LIFE project dedicated Facebook page was published. Communication team should follow the page regularly and remember to tag the page when posting relevant material.
- Communication plan and website of the project in development.
- The logo and visual identity of the project are in development. We have envisioned that the Life logo should have some continuity with the logo of the Balkan Anti-Poisoning Project and preliminary designs were requested from the chosen designer.
- Templates for press releases, relevant logos and other associated materials will be made available through an online sharing platform, which the VCF is working on setting up for the Life project.

## Conclusions

- The BalkanDetox LIFE Kick-off meeting was conducted virtually as a necessity due to the Covid19 preventive measure in force throughout Europe. The project beneficiaries are in agreement that it is important to try to organize a large, international, anti-poisoning meeting in spring 2021 if circumstances allow it, which would substitute the kick-off meeting. The meeting participants all agreed that in person meeting are much more efficient for networking, exchanging experiences on a regional level and developing cohesion among the members of the National anti-poisoning working group.
- The most important objectives and actions of the BalkanDetox LIFE project were presented to the meeting participants and securing engagement of relevant governmental institutions through their active participation in key activities of BalkanDetox LIFE was highlighted as crucial for project success.
- Capacity building of relevant staff from governmental institutions is a very important first step towards better management of poisoning incidents.
- Physical meetings have clear advantages and should be conducted whenever possible, with full compliance of all Covid19 preventive measures in force.
- It is important to establish synergies between existing relevant projects and initiatives that are already implemented nationally by governmental institutions and establishing



synergies with other on-going Life project being implemented in the region and throughout Europe.

- The Steering Committee (SC) of the BalkanDetox LIFE project is foreseen to consist of 7 members from the national governmental authorities from the target Balkan countries, one member from the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic challenge, Junta de Andalucía, one representative from the Mava foundation, one representative from Euronatur and one representative from BirdLife International. 5 potential members of the SC confirmed their participation.
- The Coordination team of the BalkanDetox LIFE project, comprised of project coordinators from all project beneficiaries, was established and quarterly progress and technical reporting procedures and deadlines were established and agreed upon.
- The Financial team for the BalkanDetox LIFE project, comprised of financial officers and accountants from each of the project beneficiaries, was established and regular reporting procedures and timeframe were established and agreed upon by the project beneficiaries.
- The Communication team of the BalkanDetox LIFE project, comprised of communication personnel from all project beneficiaries, was established and basic structure of the Communication plan was represented and agreed upon by all project beneficiaries.
- General press releases about outputs of the project, which should be disseminated nationally by associated beneficiaries through their medial channels, should be adapted and their content adjusted by their communication personnel to best suit their national target audiences and media contacts and communicate the content in the best way.