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ECOTOURISM IN ALBANIA: THE PROPOSAL OF NATURALISTIC ROUTES IN THE VLORA REGION

RIASSUNTO

In occasione del progetto INTERREG III Italia-Albania PER.NA.TUR., è stata realizzata una proposta di escursionismo naturalistico nella regione di Vlorë. La proposta si è concretizzata nella realizzazione di tre percorsi. Il comune di Orikum è stato interessato da due di questi (denominati “Marmiro” e “Karaburun”), e il Comune di Nartë da uno (denominato “Dajlan”).

La proposta finale è derivata da oltre un anno di sopralluoghi e visite, sia per accertare le presenze faunistiche (generalmente elusive) che per documentare le presenze floristiche (nelle diverse stagioni). I sopralluoghi hanno consentito di collaudare anche le infrastrutture e i mezzi di trasporto. In particolare è stato condotto uno studio approfondito della recettività turistica dell’intera zona, con censimento delle strutture (alberghi e ristoranti), e valutazioni numeriche della capacità di accoglienza e dei flussi demografici. I beni culturali e le tradizioni locali sono stati censiti e schedati, alla pari delle emergenze naturalistiche. Tutto il materiale reperito è andato a costituire un portale informativo sul web (www.pernatur.org), in tre lingue (Italiano, Albanese, Inglese).

SUMMARY

The project INTERREG III Italy-Albania “PER.NA.TUR.” was the occasion to study an Ecotourism proposal in the Vlora Region (Albania). Three proposals were realized (named, “Marmiro” and “Karaburun”) in the municipality of Orikum,

and “Dajlan” in the municipality of Nartë. Information about nature, welcome structures, and tourist facilities, were collocated in a web site *ad hoc* realized (www.pernatur.org)

INTRODUCTION

After economic and politic troubles of the last historical period, Albania is receiving more and more attention as tourist destination. This is probably due to the advantageous money exchange it offers, but the tourist curiosity to visit a former “prohibited” Country (as it has been for decades) plays its role, too.

Until 1990 the people who visited Albanian tourism places were exclusively Albanians from other parts of the same Country. After this period, Albanians were allowed to leave their Country and go to work in Europe and other continents. In addition, foreign citizens were allowed to enter Albania and many Albanian people with different citizenships (Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Greece) were the first ones to enter. As a consequence, during summer holidays overall, tourism places began to receive the returning emigrants as well as Albanians of other citizenships. More recently (after 1997) a generalized politic stability, together with the increasing incoming of foreign capitals (mainly deriving from emigrants), corresponded to an actual tourism boom in some places.

Vlorë is one of these places, surpassing Dürres and Sarandë at the first place in Albania just in the last three years, and becoming the Albanian capital of tourism.

Contemporaneously, the city passed from 76,000 to 134,000 inhabitants in just 15 years with heavy environmental, architectural, and social problems.

Tourists come to Vlorë mainly for beach tourism. Their provenance areas are distant from the sea. They arrive mainly from Tiranë, the capital, but many come from foreign Countries with Albanian minorities (Kosovo, Macedonia) where the sea is absent.

The management of such a situation can produce damages to the cultural heritage (local traditions) and the natural environment (pristine areas either in the sea and on the land). The project PER.NA.TUR. had the aim to census, evaluate, and promote the natural environment in the Vlorë region to defend it from cement invasion asked from tourism growth.

The strategy adopted has been to promote a non massive tourism, opening the Albania to the European Union Countries by using the nature. In fact, considering the receptivity level of Albania tourism structures still not able to compete with the Western Europe ones, the card of the originality and untouched nature has been played to attract foreigners without high quality exigencies, adaptable, and interested to preserve nature and local traditions.

Contemporaneously with the claim for foreign visitors, this kind of proposal implicitly aims to increase the value and to protect diversity either in environments or in local traditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Three areas of particularly evident natural value have been individuated after detailed surveys on the bases of the easy approach (in terms of difficulty and the distance from tourist facilities), the landscape integrity, and the naturalistic content (in terms of flora and fauna).

The areas have been visited in different seasons (April, July, October) of the year to perceive as well as possible their natural traits (Fig. 1).

In each area a rout has been proposed. The rout has been illustrated by photographic images, which were subdivided according to subjects: Culture/tradition, Flora, Fauna, Habitats.

A series of informative cards, general and detailed, has been realized and inserted in the web site built in the framework of the PER.NA.TUR. project.



Fig. 1 - Map of the Vlorë area in the south Albania.

RESULTS

Three informative cards (A1, B1, C1) each per proposed route, were realized for the web site www.pernatur.org. Here they are in a short presentation.

The Orikum track (A1)

Info: www.pernatur.org

Type of route

Itinerary: Naturalistic, Rural

Town concerned: Orikum (VL)

District and Prefecture: Vlorë (VL)

Length: 12 km

Recommended means of transport: by car (10 km), on foot (2 Km)

Level of difficulty: medium/ rambling (E)

Useful hints: carry water and food supplies; wear comfortable boots

Best period: April - October, in the afternoon

Subjects of interest

- 1 - Marmiro: the church and the fresh-water springs
- 2 - Natural landscape: Rrëza e Kanalit highlands, Pasha Liman lagoon
- 3 - Biology: flora and fauna of the route
- 4 - Rural life: the shepherds of Orikum, the villages of Radhimë, Tragjas, Orikum, Dukat

Route A1

The ancient city of *Orico* was founded by the Eubei in the VI century B.C. The city is primarily remembered because there was a famous battle between Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompeius there, which signed the definitive success of Caesar and the consequent change of western story.

The amphitheatre (I century B.C.) dates from Roman times. Throughout the Middle Ages the city was known as Jeriko. Under Turkish occupation the name was changed into *Pasha Liman*. Not far from Orikum (about 4 km away) there is the small Church of Marmiro (XII century) at the top of a low hill, in the center of a spring that makes all its slopes marshy. On the outside the simple (and perhaps for this reason, ancient) shape of the bell is of interest. From the *Rrëza e Kanalit* slopes you can admire the whole valley, and recognize the expanses of water of the *Pasha Liman* lagoon and the Gulf of Vlorë. In front of you the plain of Dukat stretches out and rises, on the opposite side, towards the Lungarë mountains. From this highpoint it is easy to identify (from North to South) the villages of Radhimë, Tragjas, Orikum, Dukat and, at the southernmost point, the Llogara Pass that leads to the Ionian coast. The valley is rich in infiltrations of water, so it welcomes moisture-loving plants, even totally aquatic ones. Reeds and rushes are its distinctive elements. Close to the marshes wide planes of *Salicornia* form.

Along the slopes of any of the hills the thorny-oak immediately asserts itself, although prostrate and never in tree-form. The erosive furrows (wet and shady), which drop straight down from the steep slopes of the *Rrëza e Kanalit* reach a depth of about 10 m, and they shelter the only trees of the area. The intense grazing that has been carried out has resulted in the selecting of a whole range of thorny plants. The most typical animals of the area are winter aquatic birds (in transit) and frogs. In the thorny scrubs you can find some insects like grasshoppers and ant-lions. However the real attraction of the place are the turtles and tortoises: you can count dozens of them. Traces of shepherds and their temporary settlements occur all along the route.

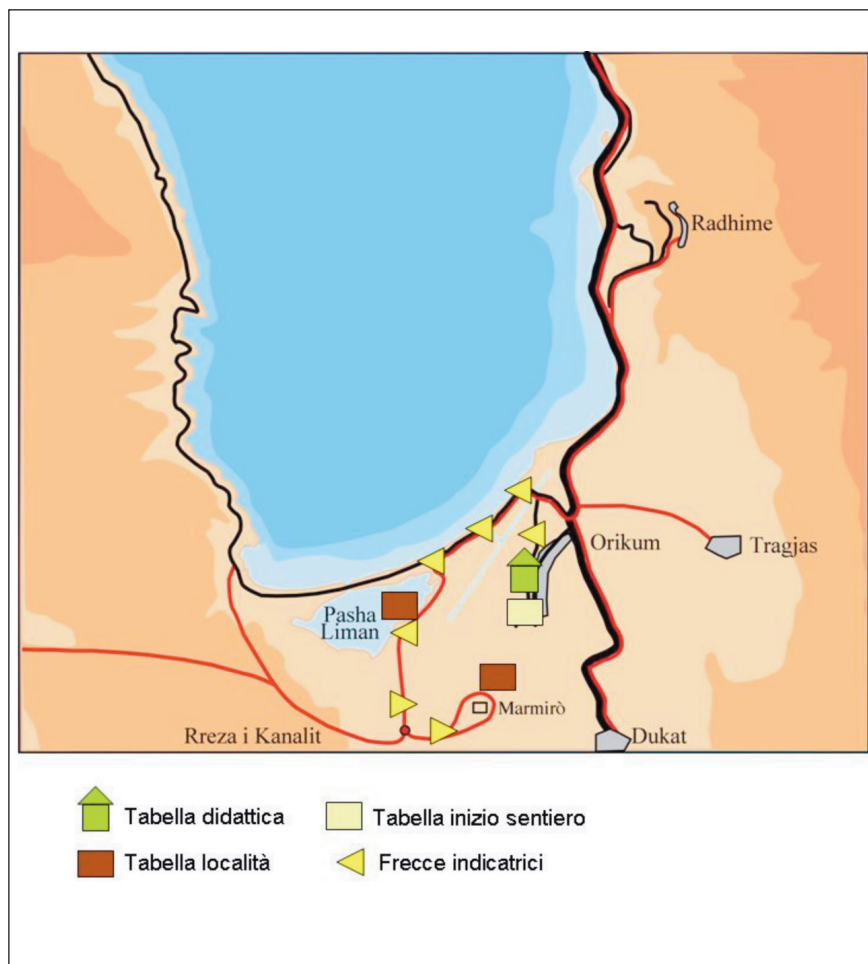


Fig. 2 - Map of the Orikum area.



a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h



i



j



k

Table 1 - Orikum

a - Marmiro Church in its landscape; **b** - internal view of the Marmiro Chuch; **c** - water reservoir for shepherds, surrounded by thirsty bees; **d** - goats on ruins, with the mounth Cika in the bottom view; **e f** - view of human life in the village Radhimë; **g** - *Emys orbicularis*; **h** - *Capnodis cariosa*; **i** - *Testudo graeca*; **j** - *Palpares libelluloides*; **k** - lagoon flora.

The Karaburun track (B1)

Info: www.pernatur.org

Type of track

Itinerary: Nature

Town concerned: Orikum (VL)

District and Prefecture: Vlorë (VL)

Length: 22.00 km

Recommended means of transport: Boat (10+8 km), mountain-bike/on foot (4 km)

Level of difficulty: for expert cyclists or rambles (EE)

Useful hints: carry water and food supplies; wear comfortable boots

Best period: April-June, September-October

Subjects of interest

- 1 - Underwater caves: Haxhi Ali cave
- 2 - Natural landscape: inland (Gulf of Vlorë) and open sea (Mezokanal Strait and Otranto Channel), Sazan Island, the Capes along the coast and highlands
- 3 - Biology: flora and fauna of the track
- 4 - Military defences: the defensive coastline of Karaburun
- 5 - Sea/diving: the submerged marine environment of Karaburun
- 6 - Rural life: the shepherds of Karaburun

Route B1

Karaburun peninsula (in Turkish *burun* = nose/promontory, *kara* = black) is 16 km long and 3-5 km wide. At its NW tip we find Cape Small Tongue (*Kepi Gjuhëzës*), the westernmost point of Albania and the closest point to Italy (76 km). The Karaburun peninsula has had the status of a Managed Nature Reserve (Code 12446, IUCN Management Category IV) since 1 January 1968, characterised by the biome of Mediterranean evergreen forests and maquis vegetation. The coast is generally high, furrowed vertically, and it has small gravel creeks. In the north you can visit the Haxhi Ali cave, the largest one on the Albanian coast. Within the cave, the “swimming-pool” measures 61 x 43 m and has a maximum depth of 11 m. The entrance is about 40 m high. In the submerged portion, a wide tunnel enters 30 m further into the rock. The marine flora and fauna are affected by cold waters even in shallow points, and this allows for the blooming of forms normally found in the depths, but here within reach of inexperienced divers. On land, from *Kepi Gjuhëzës* to *Shen Jan* (Saint John), several mushroom-shaped bunkers are scattered all along the path to prevent an umpteenth foreign invasion. The path is characterised by oak-trees (five different species), the terebinth, and *Euphorbia arborea*. From the point of view of the fauna, the path is very interesting for the presence of insects, even large sized ones. Some shepherds live in isolation on Karaburun and lead a life style that has been unchanged for millennia. The complete

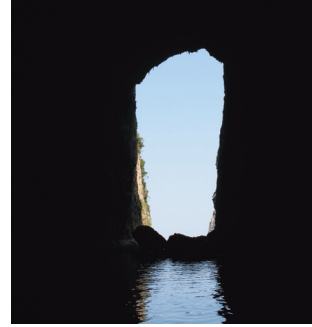
absence of villages and urbanization on Karaburun makes its nights particularly dark. The shepherds' shelters are Spartan, but some of them have made beehive-gardens. Fresh cheese and honey, or even meat on the spit, may be bought directly from these producers.



Fig. 3 - Map of the Karaburun northern extremity.



a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h



i



Table 2 - Karaburun

a, b - the Haxhi Ali cave; **c** - *Papilio* and *Epicometis* on mauve flowers; **d** - the track looking at *Kepi i Gjjuetzes*; **e** - rupicolous vegetation; **f** - spider web; **g** - *Iris* sp.; **h** - *Quercus coccifera* with *Kerria coccis*; **i** - *Quercus ilex* with acorns; **j** - *Quercus aegylops*; **k** - *Arbutus unedo*; **l, m** - Bunkers; **n** - an aspect of the Mediterranean maquis.

The Zvärneç, Dajlan, Nartë track (C1)

Info: www.pernatur.org

Type of route

Itinerary: Nature

Town concerned: Qendër (VL)

District and Prefecture: Vlorë (VL)

Length: 14.00 km

Recommended means of transport: by car, mountain-bike

Level of difficulty: Rambler (E)

Useful hints: carry water and food supplies

Best period: April-June, September-October

Subjects of interest

1 - Coastal morphology: beaches and dunes, lagoon, eroded cliffs

2 - Natural landscape: open sea (Mezokanal Strait), Sazan Island, Zvärneç Island, Nartë lagoon, sunset over the sea

3 - Biology: flora and fauna of the route

4 - Human presence: the fishermen of the lagoon, the shepherds of Nartë, a monastic complex

Route C1

The Nartë lagoon (450,000 ha) is home in winter to more than 45,000 birds belonging to 195 different species. At its south-eastern corner it surrounds a pair of islets, on one of which you can visit Saint Mary's church (XIVth century). A third of the lagoon surface is used to extract salt. Dajlan is an isthmus that separates the lagoon from the sea. It extends for a distance of 8 km, and has a width which ranges from 150 m to 3.2 km, with hills whose height varies from 30 m to 80 m. The emerging rocks show a clearly floury composition, as if they were petrified sand. Some inclusions of different materials create drawings and sculptures of extraordinary imagination. From the hilltops you can enjoy a wonderful view in any direction. The itinerary touches all types of aquatic environments: freshwater pond, brackish lagoon, sea. The dunes of the beach present typical vegetation groups, the only trees present, cypresses, completely cover the island of the monastery. On the sand of the beach it is easy to recognize the tracks left by the passage of birds or insects. Some mushroom-shaped bunkers are scattered along the coast, and form the backdrop for the slow return of cattle herds to their nightly rest. In the lagoon extensive aquaculture is carried out, and this makes eels, sea bream and sea bass easily available in the local restaurants. The monastic complex of Zvärneç Island, is the destination of a pilgrimage on the 15th August to celebrate Mary's name. Behind the apse of the church on the island, there is a small cemetery where Marigo Posio rests, the woman who embroidered the flag

that was hoisted on the first day of Albanian independence from the centuries-old Ottoman domination (28th November 1912). The villagers of Nartë are of Greek origin. In Nartë they cultivate vines and produce a renowned wine. The houses which have a “sofa”, a big stone located at the entrance where the elderly men spend their time, are very characteristic. At the centre of the village there is the church and the clock tower.



Fig. 4 - Map of the Nartë area.



a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h



i



j

Table 3 - Dajlan

a - the wooden bridge to the isle and orthodox church of Zvërneç, in the middle of the Nartë lagoon; **b** - spines of an acacia bush; **c, d** - natural sculptures on the Dajlan shoreline; **e, f** - Church of Saint Maria, Zvërneç. Outside and inside views; **g** - the stone waves at Dajlan; **h** - man made reed-barriers for the aquacultural management of the Nartë lagoon; **i** - white heron, *Egretta*, in the Nartë lagoon; **j** - Sand beach, Dajlan.

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