

In Montenegro, Skadar Pedunculate Oak trees *Quercus robur* ssp *scutariensis* stand as lone individuals or small remnant patches of what once were vast old-growth oak forests that were an integral part of Skadar Lake's floodplain zones and surrounding river systems. These endemic oak forests also became some of the first human settlements as oak was a great source of heating and building material. Then came agriculture and urbanisation and the rest is history.

The proverb 'from tiny acorns mighty oaks grow' is often used in reference to the ambition of Henry Ford, whose car manufacturing empire of hundreds of factories and hundreds of thousands of employees started from a single humble beginning. It's now with a great irony that young ecologists from the Balkans have taken inspiration from the same phrase in their ambition to save a Critically Endangered subspecies of oak tree: not only have they collected over 20,000 acorns and aim to plant them into forests, but they also successfully campaigned to protect a single monumental tree - resulting in a new road being diverted. Today, the remaining oaks, which are easily recognisable by the long 3 cm stalks on their acorns, have monumental value - both ecologically, e.g. as homes for hundreds of species, and culturally, as places for family and friends to gather under and tell old stories, or for the healing properties of their bark. And if you were compelled to reduce such an amazing being to just its monetary value, studies show that one of these oaks in your garden accumulates 1.7 tons of CO₂ per year, binds 1.36 kg of air polluting particles and saves 1.460 kWh energy.

Enter early-career botany experts from Crnogorsko Društvo Ekologa, the Montenegrin Ecologists Society (MES), who recognised this tree's uncertain future and were granted by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund* to inventory and restore them. Part of a new generation of plant conservationists in the region, they've managed to collect an incredible 20,000 acorns this season, which they estimate will be enough to produce at least 10,000 seedlings. Thanks to great engagement with local landowners and volunteers, MES located many remarkable individuals as well as key forest patches in four Key Biodiversity Areas: Skadar Lake, Buljaric, Delta Bojana, and Zeta River (where the tree is a symbol for the recently declared Zeta River Nature Park).

One consequence was the discovery that one old oak was about to be felled for a new road construction. MES acted fast, raising awareness in the local media, and saved the tree. Pedunculate oaks in the region have long been a respected symbol of strength, power, longevity, spiritual and material wealth. Now, as cars pass by, this tree stands as a lone, brave symbol against many external pressures on Montenegro's environment. It did not produce acorns this year, but acorns were collected from specimens just a couple of

kilometres away, showing that the area was once a connected forest community. Next year MES begin planting – bolstering existing forests, planting in schoolyards, restoring private land where once old forests existed, and have high hopes of planting on agricultural land too. Local people exposed to MES’ awareness work are already interested in planting oaks in their gardens. So when starting out with saving a species, remember that with the right ambition, one oak can be enough to plant over 100 hectares of forest – and divert a road. One wonders what Henry Ford would have thought about that.

Source: birdlife.org