

Shar Mountain has 37 glacial lakes, 25 of them in North Macedonia and the rest in Kosovo, which glint in the mountain's folds like a myriad of gray-green eyes scanning the skies. Especially impressive is the region's biodiversity, which counts 200 endemic plant species, 167 species of butterflies, 12 of amphibians, 18 of reptiles, 130 of birds and 45 of mammals. That is almost half of the total number of mammal species in North Macedonia.

After decades of being exploited by loggers, a vast, cross-border area of breathtaking beauty in the Balkans centered on Shar Mountain is close to becoming a national park, one of the largest in Europe. North Macedonian lawmakers are expected to shortly pass a bill granting Shar Mountain that status. The area of over 240,000 hectares (593,053 acres) that ranges through Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo is a treasure of natural beauty and diverse and unique wildlife.

But the idyll on the Balkan's Green Belt has been endangered for years.

Decades of illegal logging in the forests have left erosion-scarred landscapes, especially in the more densely populated lower slopes of Shar Mountain, which locals have used for free farming, hunting, fuel and timber. Over the past two decades, North Macedonia has lost about 40,000 hectares of forest to illegal logging, authorities say.

Anela Stavrevska-Panajotova, an International Union for Conservation of Nature expert, says the country is witnessing "a historic opportunity, after 60 years, to have a new national park, which is the missing piece for protected areas in the Balkans."

"Together with other protected areas in other neighboring countries, we will have the largest trans-boundary protected area in all of Europe. And we are very proud about it!" she said.

Since 1994, authorities have been trying to figure out how best to protect Shar Mountain's over 62,000 hectares in North Macedonia from further devastation. Some support has come from the U.N. Environment Program. North Macedonia is also trying to meet the European Union's target for joining the block, which says nations must protect at least 12% of their territory. North Macedonia now has an estimated 9% protected, and with Shar Mountain National Park that will rise to over 13%.

The area will be divided into four zones: one strictly protected that makes up 27% of the park; an active management zone; another for sustainable use; and a buffer zone.

Naser Xhemaili, the 32-year-old owner of a company that offers mountain tourism programs and horseback rides, expects many benefits from the national park designation, including improved infrastructure such as roads.

"We await a lot from the national park: tourist arrivals into our cabins, sales of dairy products, which I believe will be much better and at a higher price," he said.

North Macedonia's environment minister, Naser Nuredini, argued that the park will have long-term benefits and not just for locals.

"We are creating one of the largest protected areas in Europe, together with the national parks Sharri in Kosovo and Mavrovo in Albania," he said. "This is going to have huge potential for future generations, for the current generation as well, because now we can use a national resource in a sustainable way."

"We are talking about skiing in the winter, hiking and biking in the summer, tourism from across the world," he added.

Daniel Bogner, the leading expert for the national park's management plan, said there's still a lot of work ahead, especially in the next few months, including drawing up a budget, hiring staff and building infrastructure such as hiking trails.

"We need experts for scientific work, we need experts for tourism development, for administration, for fund-raising, for educational activities," he said.

Iskra Stojanova, a project coordinator for the U.N. Environment Program, says support for the park will come from the state government at first "but in the future, the park should be self-sustainable."

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