

Alan Hulme Ranger Services Manager Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority:

Statement Regarding the BPPP Summer Programme

Over the last 5/6 years the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority (YDNPA) has hosted a number of visits to the Yorkshire Dales National Park for representatives from local communities, government and non government organisations from each of the countries within the proposed Peace Park boundaries but mainly Thethi and the surrounding Shala Valley area.

Visits to the Yorkshire Dales National Park have been centered on Malham and have revolved around showing guests some of the benefits of having national park status, as well as looking at issues relating to conservation, visitor management and how the community interacts with these aspects in what is a very busy visitor honeypot receiving over 500,000 visitors per year.

As a result earlier this year the YDNPA received invitations from the Environmental Centre 'Valbona', other Non Government Organisations and of course Antonia to visit and take part in various summer programmes, workshops and give presentations to a range of audiences in Albania. This provided a fantastic opportunity for us to see first hand the issues that the people and organisations in the region face on a daily basis and not just to deal with them in theory.

So it was with a little trepidation of not knowing quite what to expect Paul Sheehan, (Ranger Wensleydale) and I took off from Gatwick on the 13th July 2008 heading for Tirana.

On arrival we were met by Aferdita Prroni and Sokol Bushgjokaj (representatives of the Environmental Centre 'Valbona) and after being extremely well fed at a local restaurant we spent our first night in Tirana before heading for the Valbona Valley by spectacular ferry journey along the Koman Lake (formed by the damming of the River Drin).

The next three days were spent in the Valbona Valley staying with a fantastic local family in Rrogam. The spontaneous football match which occurred in the freshly cut meadow will not be forgotten in a hurry with people arriving from all over the valley to join in. Let's just say 'it got a little competitive' and leave it at that. During our time there we met with representatives and the Head of the Commune of Margegaj where we gave a presentation on our own National Park and discussed issues relating to tourism and conservation.

From Rrogam we hiked over the pass to Thethi, we welcomed the afternoon of rest and time for a little orientation of our new surroundings. The following days shot by in a blur taking part in various presentations and workshops. However, the morning spent playing educational games with the younger children was a great experience and apart from the slight language difficulties was no different to being at home. The workshop with the villagers also seemed to be well received with a significant turn out (not sure that was entirely down to us).

The work being carried out by all the volunteers (who I'm not going to name, you know who you are) was amazing. It was a privilege to see their dedication and commitment to the programme. It was so appreciated by all the kids and adults we spoke to during our

short stay. It is a great credit to them and to what the Balkans Peace Park is trying to achieve.

So what of the highlights, these were too many to list but here are just a few of our favourites (in no particular order).

- the scenery (nearly as good as the Dales!) and the hiking
- the people
- the hospitality
- the people
- the (very) regular food & coffee (raki) breaks
- and of course we can't forget to mention the people

Our final day (morning) was spent in Shkodra in a series of presentations culminating with a meeting with the president for the Regional Council for Shkodra. What we found most compelling is the similarities in issues both the countryside organisations in Albania we have faced in the past are continuing to encounter.

The Valbona and Thethi areas are truly amazing areas and could be termed as virgin areas in relation to high profile tourism and marketing. It is this that makes them so appealing to many people around the world, who are looking for that ever elusive true alpine experience.

We found the whole local community to be hugely proud and protective of their areas. This is a fantastic base to start from, because without their interest and support it is an extremely difficult balancing act to create true, and we mean true sustainable tourism without seriously affecting the natural resources that attract people in the first place. Here lies the difficulty ahead and one we are extremely keen to remain a partner in.

There were numerous ideas discussed too many to list and our final day with Mark Rupa gave us an insight to the political and bureaucratic issues that play such an important role in moving forward. Over the next few months we will be exploring further some of the issues raised and see how we can build on our developing partnership.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank, on behalf of Paul and myself, all those that that we met or were a part of organising our visit. It was truly a life time experience and one we certainly look forward to repeating. THANK YOU

Alan Hulme, Ranger Services Manager
Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority