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## ECOTOURISM AND MANAGEMENT IN THE 20 YEARS OLD BALATON UPLANDS (BALATON-FELVIDÉKI) NATIONAL PARK

The Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park celebrates the 20th anniversary of its foundation in 2017. The national park, located on a 57,019 hectares large area north of Lake Balaton and in the Kis-Balaton region, was established by uniting six separate Landscape Protection Areas, thus creating a mainly contiguous ecological system in Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidék) and its surroundings. In 1979, Kis-Balaton, an extensive marshland with an outstanding biodiversity to the west of Lake Balaton, was declared a protected area according to the international Ramsar Convention. Another geographical unit of the national park, the Tihany Peninsula received from the Council of Europe the European Diploma for Protected Areas in 2003, recognising its exceptional geological heritage of European importance and the high efficiency of nature conservation management on the peninsula. Inside the national park area and also beyond its borders there are various Natura 2000 sites, contributing to the conservation of habitats, plant and animal species of European importance. The more than 3200 km<sup>2</sup> large Bakony–Balaton UNESCO Global Geopark – including most of the national park area – sets the aim of preserving abiotic natural assets, interpreting the rich geological, natural and cultural heritage of the geopark and raising awareness of their social significance. Interpreting the rich protected natural heritage of these areas and the cultural assets linked to nature is an important aim of the directorate. Visitor centres and visitor sites serve this goal during the holiday season and also throughout the year. Guided nature tours, geotours and adventure caving tours, activity days for families and school groups, handcrafts workshops and the national park's presence at numerous events also contribute to raising awareness of the importance of the highly diverse natural and cultural heritage of the region and the importance of their protection. Several promotional tools serve the visibility of the directorate's goals, activities and ecotourism offer, including multi-language websites, a Smartphone application, several Facebook and Instagram sites, a You Tube channel, newsletters, publications, oral presentations and other events. With the growing number of ecotourism events and visitor sites (presently 3 visitor centres and 11 visitor sites) and with the rising number of visitors – almost half a million registered visitors in 2016 – the successful management of the ecotourism-related facilities and services of the national park directorate has become a great challenge during the last years.

*Keywords:* national park, ecotourism, natural environment, visitor management

### Interpreting the rich natural heritage

Currently there are 10 national parks in Hungary. The whole territory of Hungary is divided into operational areas of national park directorates (*Fig. 1*).

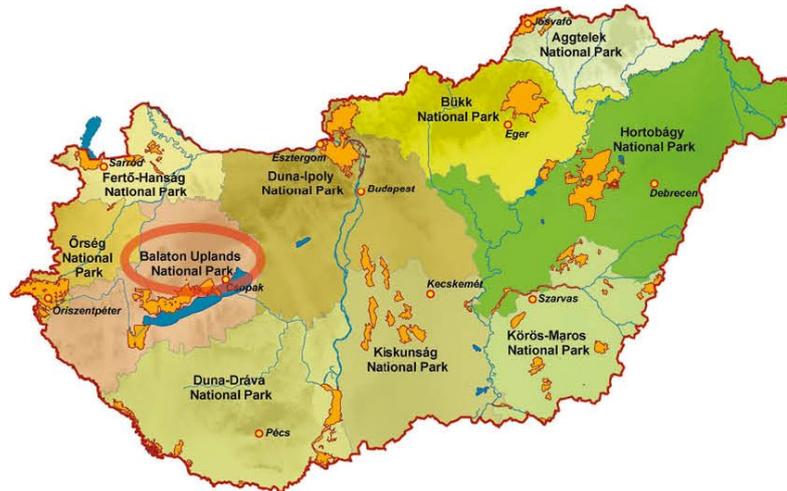


Figure 1: National Parks in Hungary  
(Experience? Naturally! Published by the Ministry of Rural Development, May 2014)

The key tasks of a national park directorate are to protect and interpret natural assets, raising awareness of people from young to old. In this way the directorate encourages promotion of ecotourism and strives to strengthen the nature conservation attitude of society. In order to increase public awareness of environmental issues, intensive communication and a purposeful marketing strategy are needed. The most important promotional tools of the national park are visitor sites and visitor centres, information board systems, events, guided tours, open-air schools, trainings, guiding booklets, websites, newsletters, a Smartphone application and social media platforms.

Ecotourism takes place in natural areas, where visitors can enjoy all the benefits that only nature can give. A real ecotourist is willing to learn, has an understanding of the vulnerability and the diversity of habitats and species, appreciates local cultures, and attempts to have a low impact on the environment. Protected areas, national parks are often chosen as scenes of ecotourism, especially when visitors are offered a colourful, many-sided supply of activities and interesting sites to visit.



Lake Balaton is the second most popular tourism destination in Hungary, with only the capital Budapest surpassing it. Regarding domestic tourism it is the most visited region in the country. The lake and the natural wonders of the national park enhance each other's attractiveness, thereby raising the touristic value of the region.

There is a change in the attitude of vacationers: there is a growing demand for venturing out of the hotel or campsite to explore the surroundings, walking in nature, gaining authentic experiences in gastronomy and culture.

The European Diploma, recognising the unique geological formations, the lavender-scented landscape and the high level of nature conservation on Tihany Peninsula, was reassessed by a regular on-the-spot expert appraisal in 2017. The strictly protected wetland of Kis-Balaton is an important Ramsar area and bird habitat, counting more than 260 bird species, providing an excellent site for bird-watchers and nature photographers, as well.

In November 2015, UNESCO endorsed the new International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme and a label connected to this programme: UNESCO Global Geoparks. Based on this new programme and label, all members of the Global Geoparks Network Association became UNESCO Global Geoparks. The Bakony–Balaton UNESCO Global Geopark, managed by the Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park Directorate and revalidated every four years by international geopark experts, emphasizes the importance of the outstanding geological heritage, its links to local communities and promotes local sustainable development, primarily via geotourism activities.

In June 2016, UNESCO officially designated the 5-country Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve 'Mura-Drava-Danube' (TBR MDD), which contains a part of the operational area of the Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park Directorate at the river Mura. The Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve combines the cluster of protected areas along the Mura-Drava-Danube region and jointly manages the shared river ecosystem in a sustainable manner while boosting economic growth and development in the region. The initiative is also part of the EU Danube Regional Strategy.

### **Ecotourism facilities and services provided by the Balaton Uplands National Park Directorate**

The Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park offers a wide selection of outdoor and indoor activities, places to visit, guided nature tours, events, festivals, open-air schools and educative programmes. In accordance with the fundamental goals of nature conservation, the majority of the protected nature areas and sites are open to the public, can be visited without a guide and throughout the year on marked

hiking trails. However, some strictly protected areas (e.g. Kis-Balaton) may be visited only in the frame of guided tours.

The National Park Directorate created 14 interpretive sites themed on the natural and cultural heritage in every region of its operational area. Among them there are three visitor centres and four caves. Each of the directorate's visitor centres was awarded the first place of the 'Ecotourism Establishment of the Year' by the Ministry of Rural Development, the Ministry for National Economy and the Hungarian National Tourism Office (2011, 2012 and 2016).

The National Park Directorate achieved the second place among the Hungarian applicants at the European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) award focused on promoting sustainable tourism in protected areas and launched by the European Commission.

The *Lavender House Visitor Centre* – opened in 2011 as the first visitor centre of the national park – presents Tihany Peninsula in a way that provides special entertainment for young and old alike. The Lavender House also serves as the visitor centre of the European Diploma Awarded Volcanic Phenomena of Tihany Peninsula and it is the Eastern Gate of the Bakony–Balaton UNESCO Global Geopark. The once raging fire of the volcanoes and the harmony of the landscape that was shaped as a result of it is interpreted in the visitor centre by a short, spectacular film (also available in English) and by an interactive exhibition (with English interpretive boards). Its goal is to bring the exciting natural phenomena that shaped our Earth millions of years ago. With the help of interactive displays the visitors can explore the centuries-long co-existence of people and nature along with the emblematic culture that developed from it: lavender production. In addition, the Lavender House awaits visitors with a lavender-themed souvenir shop and a tea house and also offers handcraft workshops. In June, visitors are invited to participate in the lavender harvest and in this period the Lavender House offers lots of complementary programmes. In 2016, the exhibition of the Lavender House underwent a major renewal.

The *Pannon Observatory Visitor Centre* is located in Bakonybél, in the heart of the High Bakony Landscape Protection Area. It is a tourist attraction that is independent of the weather, daytime and season, has a scientific nature and is based on astronomy while it is also entertaining. The major elements of the visitor centre are an astronomical telescope park, a digital planetarium with 52 backrest cinema chairs and the astronomical and space research history exhibitions. The Pannon Observatory is the first and only digital planetarium with 2x4K resolution in Central Europe. In addition to being suitable for a traditional planetarium show, its greatest novelty is that it is able to project documentaries optimised for special dome surfaces in an amazing quality. Under the telescope dome of the Observatory, which has a diameter of 5.5 meters, there is a telescope park complying even with scientific

requirements. In addition to showing the structure and operation of the telescopes, visitors can have a look at the Sun with the special H-alpha telescope if there are no clouds. Night sky observations with telescope are available based on interest and the actual weather, with prior registration. Since 2012, the exhibition and attractions of the visitor centre have been extended and renewed every year.

*Tapolca Lake Cave Visitor Centre* provides a unique experience to those who are interested in the secrets of the underground world. A tortuous cave system is hiding under the streets and houses of Tapolca, a little town not far from Balaton. In the strictly protected cave, which was discovered more than 100 years ago, the visitors can make a unique boat trip on the lit, bluish water of the underground lake. The temperature is about 18°C in the cave all year round. Thanks to the modernization of its lighting system, the Lake Cave awaits visitors from March 2012 with more beautiful lights and view than ever. In January 2015, a new visitor centre was opened next to the cave, also serving as the Western Gate of the Bakony–Balaton Geopark. The mysterious world of caves and other karst formations and the geopark is interpreted by special attractions in 10 exhibition rooms. Children can crawl in the adventure cavern while the sensory abilities of adults are challenged by the ‘feel the rocks’ game. Palaeogeographic paintings introduce the wildlife of past epochs. We ourselves can go on an underground expedition by watching 3D photos and a film.

In *Csodabogyós Cave* (in Balatonederics) and the *Kőlik Cave* (in Szentgál) you can stretch your limits as you explore the narrow underground passages in a caving overall, guided by speleologists. You can admire spectacular limestone layers in the *Lóczy Cave* (in Balatonfüred). After walking to the top of the spectacular remains of a basalt volcano called *Hegyesztű*, you can enjoy the breathtaking view on Lake Balaton and the surrounding volcanic remnant hills. *Salföld Manor* is home to traditional Hungarian domestic animals, providing lots of fun for families and animal lovers. In the *Buffalo Reserve Kápolnapuszta* the largest buffalo herd in Hungary, an interactive exhibition, an informative walkway and picnic areas await visitors. The cultural-historical values of the national park are presented at other visitor sites including a traditional *water mill in Zalasántó* and the *Folk Haus in Vörs*. The visitor sites are maintained and continuously developed by the Directorate. There are questionnaires available for tourists at the interpretive sites and on the homepage of the Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park in order to improve its ecotourism services.

Apart from these sites, there are many walking routes and educative nature trails for the ultimate exploration of the national park. Guided tours can be booked by groups to explore the natural heritage with the help of an expert in all of the regions of the national park. Numerous guided nature tours and geotours await individual guests from January till December in the various regions of the national park and the geopark.

The national park's events are of special importance regarding awareness raising purposes providing an opportunity to personal interactions between the national park's staff and the visitors. The most popular touristic event of the national park is Lavender Festival and Lavender Weeks on Tihany Peninsula in the frame of which visitors can harvest lavender themselves. The Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park Directorate, the municipality of Tihany and the Németh László Culture Centre await visitors in June with lavender-themed events, such as cultural programmes, lavender distillation, arts and crafts, guided excursions, children's programmes and so on. The Buffalo Festival organised by the Directorate at the beginning of July in the Buffalo Reserve Kápolnapuszta has already become a tradition. Handcrafts fair, local producers with quality products enrich the programme. Children are entertained by handcrafts workshop and animators.

A cultural event of national significance, the Valley of Arts Festival is organised on the turn of July and August on the northern border of the national park area, in and near Kapolcs village. The Directorate has been present at this significant festival since the first years of the festival with presentations, guided nature tours, workshops and other events, recently in cooperation with several green NGO's such as the Hungarian Society for Environmental Education, the Jane Goodall Institute or WWF.

### **Visitors to the national park**

The number of visitors to the Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park and the operational area of the directorate grows steadily year after year. In 2016, the number of the visitors at the 14 visitor sites reached 370,000, while the number of booked guided tours exceeded 500 occasions. In 2016, the park's experts met the fans of nature at 167 public events (guided nature tours, geotours and adventure caving tours, handcraft workshops, activity days for families and school groups). The park's staff participated 65 times in external events (fairs, markets, conferences, workshops, events of partners).

In 2016, the national park counted – considering all of its programmes and services – more than 440,000 registered visitors in total (*Fig. 3*).

Although most of the visitor sites of the National Park Directorate are open all year round and there are numerous programmes provided by the Directorate even in the wintertime, seasonality is still remarkable. The most visited months in the national park are May due to school excursions and June, July and August because of the summer holiday. School groups and families are among the most important target groups of the national park, but from young to old everybody is a potential visitor. Similarly to the whole Balaton Region, two-third of the national park's visitors are domestic, one-third of them come from abroad. The results of visitor

monitoring are an essential source of a sustainable and effective tourism management. In order to gain more information about the visitors and to investigate their opinion and motivation regarding their visit in the national park, several surveys have been conducted. For several years the surveys were carried out in close cooperation with the Hungarian Tourism Ltd. and the Pannon University. The composition of the questions was formed with the help of tourism experts. Hard copies of the questionnaire papers were available for visitors and collected by the Directorate at the national park's visitor sites and evaluated yearly by the Pannon University. In 2010, the Directorate introduced online questionnaires about the visitor sites on its homepage and evaluates them yearly. However, considering the number of the incoming questionnaires the sample is not representative, but the Directorate gets valuable data and feedback from their visitors which is essential to improve its services properly.

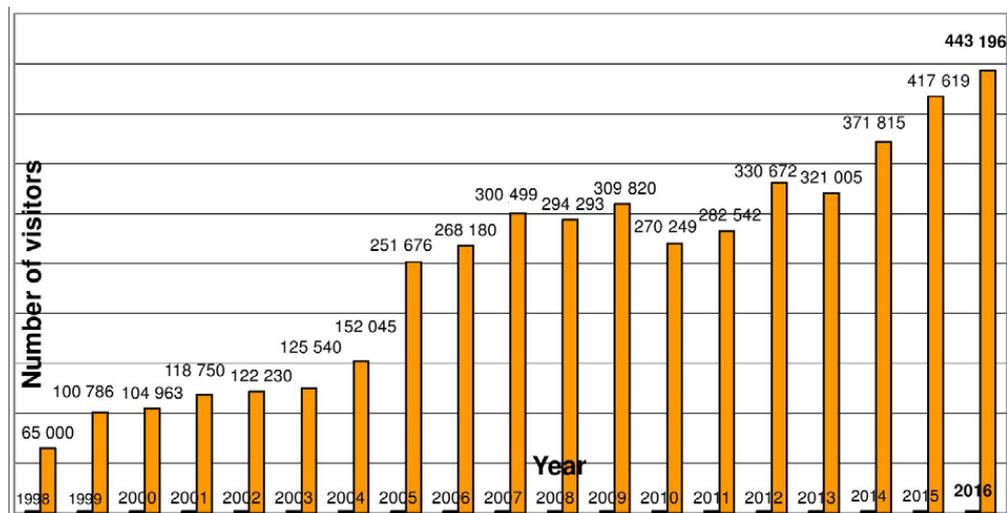


Figure 3: Visitors registered by the Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park  
(Source: Yearly Reports of the National Park Directorate, 1998–2016)

Table 1: Visitors registered at the visitor sites  
of the Balaton Uplands National Park Directorate (2016)  
(Source: Yearly Report of the Balaton-felvidéki National Park Directorate, 2016)

	Name of the visitor site	Number of visitors
1	Csodabogyós Cave	3 084
2	Diás Island (at Kis-Balaton)	4 163
3	House of Forests	5 423

4	Hegyestű Geological Interpretive Site	49 338
5	Buffalo Reserve	36 431
6	Kotsy Water Mill	2 970
7	Lavender House Visitor Centre	26 235
8	Lóczy Cave	18 537
9	Pannon Observatory Visitor Centre	51 370
10	Salföld Manor	28 723
11	Szentgáli-kőlik Cave	266
12	Disused Sand Quarry of Várpalota	122
13	Tapolca Lake Cave Visitor Centre	144 424
14	Folk House in Vörs	553
<b>Total</b>		<b>371 639</b>

Table 2: Visitors using ecotourism services provided by Balaton Uplands National Park Directorate (2016)  
 (Source: Yearly Report of the Balaton-felvidéki National Park Directorate, 2016)

Type of the service		Number of visitors
Guided tours		17 437
Events		31 090
Open-air Schools		1 035
Camps		35
Other	Cultural events	2 816
	Handcrafts workshops	10 612
	Photo tours at Kis-Balaton	8
	Canoe tours	69
Geotour-guide training courses		33
Contests		318
Geo-workshops		1 336
Oral presentations of the staff		3 172
<b>Total</b>		<b>67 997</b>

Table 3: Accommodations run by the Balaton Uplands National Park Directorate (2016)  
 (Source: Yearly Report of the Balaton-felvidéki National Park Directorate, 2016)

Arrivals	3 560
Guest nights	7 183

Table 4: Visitors registered by the Balaton Uplands National Park Directorate (2016)  
(Source: Yearly Report of the Balaton-felvidéki National Park Directorate, 2016)

	<i>Number of visitors/guests</i>
Visitor sites and ecotourism services in total	439 639
Accommodations (Arrivals)	3 560
<b>Registered visitors altogether, 2016</b>	<b>443 196</b>

### **Marketing communication tools used by the Balaton Uplands National Park Directorate**

The Hungarian national park directorates carry out independent communication and marketing activity; however it is synchronized and coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture as all ten national park directorates are supervised by this ministry. The central website, the facebook and Instagram sites of the national park directorates maintained and managed by the Ministry of Agriculture serve this goal well. The National Park Directorate puts a great emphasis on cooperation in its communication activities both with domestic and international partners. Mutual promotion and post sharing opportunities are of high importance and make it possible to enhance the full potential of synergy effects.

In 2013, the Directorate introduced a new, modern corporate identity with a new logo and promotion film strengthening the image. In 2017, the Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park celebrates the 20th anniversary of its foundation. For this year a special version of the logo was developed and used in its communication.



Figure 2: The logo of the National Park  
[Balaton Uplands (Balaton-felvidéki) National Park Directorate, 2013, 2017]

The Directorate focuses more and more on online communication tools including websites and social media platforms instead of printed materials.

The tri-lingual (Hungarian, English and German) official website of the national park was redesigned in 2015 and optimized for mobile devices. The website providing up-to-date information and news is accessed by nearly 1 million visitors per year. The three visitor centres, the Bakony–Balaton UNESCO Global Geopark and the Csodabogyós Cave have separate websites too, thus the Directorate has to manage the administration of 6 different websites in total. There are several external websites as well, where the Directorate has an admin role. The newsletter of the national park is sent monthly to 7300 e-mail addresses.

In 2012, the Directorate – realising the importance of social media – created Facebook pages for the national park and some of its visitor sites. By the end of the year 2016, the Directorate’s nine Facebook pages (Balaton Uplands National Park, Bakony–Balaton Geopark, Tapolca Lake Cave Visitor Centre, Lavender House Visitor Centre, Csodabogyós Cave, Salföld Manor, Kis-Balaton, Buffalo Reserve Kápolnapuszta, Pannon Observatory) counted 38,000 fans in total, including 6000 engaged fans and 70,000 weekly accesses in average.

Aiming to reach more young people under 25 years of age, the Directorate created at the end of 2015 an Instagram site and reached approximately 600 fans by the end of 2016.

The national park’s YouTube channel counts 93 subscribers and 101,350 views with 35 uploaded videos on 25. March 2017.

The YouTube channel and all of the Facebook pages of the national park, the geopark and its visitor centres are easily accessible from the national park’s official website (bfnp.hu). Facebook Like and Share Button are placed on the website as well.

Since April 2012, the national park’s Smartphone application has been available for Android, iPhone/iPad, Windows Phone, Windows 8 operational systems and can be downloaded free of charge.

By using social media platforms we can easily access our target groups with quick and effective communication. However, a considerable amount of human resources has to be applied to achieve good results.

The operation of the Directorate’s ecotourism facilities are overseen by the staff working in the Department of Ecotourism and Environmental Education of the Directorate. Some visitor sites and centres are directly operated by the staff, others by entrepreneurs on a contractual basis. A coordination day is held every year for these entrepreneurs with essential information regarding the management of the ecotourism facilities and continuous communication and support is provided for them throughout the year. The ecotourism activities (presence at events, guided hikes, workshops) are carried out by the staff of the Department and a number of guided geotours are provided by the Geopark Partner geotour guides. Several members of the Ranger Service actively participate in the every day operation of





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### Nature conservation and regional development, networking

‘The tourism sector largely contributes to the local, regional and even national economy.’ (Tourism – E-Learning Tool in the Frame of the Project “Learning for Lakes”, 2013) Intact nature, protected areas provide a high recreational value. The preservation of nature is important for sustainable tourism and regional development. Therefore the national park directorate inevitably has to deal with the issues of sustainable regional development.

The United Nations has declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (IYST 2017) to raise awareness among decision-makers and the public on the contribution of sustainable tourism to development. The Global Geoparks Network became a partner of the IYST 2017 in order to promote UNESCO Global Geoparks collectively as sustainable tourism destinations on the international tourism market. Within this scheme, the programmes of the Bakony–Balaton UNESCO Global Geopark during the European Geoparks Week celebrated IYST 2017 simultaneously with 68 other UNESCO Global Geoparks in Europe.

Cooperation with regional tourism actors proves to be necessary and fruitful to achieve our common goals. Our national park has an extensive partnership network with local tourism providers and key actors of regional development (hotels, tourism destination management organizations, other service providers, NGO’s etc.). There is a cooperation scheme with local geotour guides as well, who guide geotours within the Bakony–Balaton Geopark, based on the Partnership Agreement

concluded between the geotour guide and the National Park Directorate. Consultation, promotion and the possibility to use the label 'Geopark Partner' are the advantages of the agreement. Nature conservation aspects have to be respected and a yearly fee has to be paid by the guide. Those persons can become a Geopark Partner geotour guide who have successfully completed at least one of the Directorate's geotour guide training courses, one organized each year.

The *National Park Product* brand system aims at supporting the local enterprises and husbandry operated within nature conservation areas by extending their products' recognition. We organize a high number of events and use different communication tools for promoting local National Park Products. Until now more than 150 labelled products have been approved. A certain process is carried out for the improvement of the products, including a form to fill in, a meeting of a committee where products are examined and tasted and a contract to be concluded with the local producers of the approved products for the use of the label, including the review of the producing process by the National Park Directorate.

The National Park carries out active international cooperation. In the frame of the Pannonian Nature Network (PaNaNet) established in 2008, we are working closely together with other national and nature parks situated in Western Hungary and Eastern Austria. The main goals of the PaNaNet+ project are the coordinated use of natural and cultural heritage, and the development and optimization of sustainable, cross-border, accessible nature-tourism offers, furthermore increasing the involvement of tourism organizations in an effort to prolong the nature tourism seasons.

The national park directorate is also the member of the EUROPARC Federation in order to share experience and to learn about all aspects of the management of protected natural areas. Conferences, webinars and study tours enhance the exchange of know-how within the federation.

The Bakony–Balaton Geopark became the member of the European and the Global Geoparks Network in 2012. Being a Global Geopark, it became a UNESCO Global Geopark in 2015 within the framework of UNESCO's International Geosciences and Geopark Programme. The networking among UNESCO Global Geoparks is ensured by their experts' meetings twice a year and by open conferences every autumn. We are working closely together with 7 other geoparks in the Danube Region in the framework of an ongoing international geotourism project (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, Danube GeoTour).

### **Conclusion**

Partnership and international networking contribute to increase public awareness of the environmental issues and give opportunities to learn best practices. Intense

communication with and involvement of the local people and organisations in nature conservation and sustainable ecotourism provide opportunities to improve the economy of these rural areas. Social media platforms provide easy access to our target groups with quick and effective communication. However, a purposeful marketing strategy and appropriate human resources capacity are essential for a successful management. Although ecotourism is not necessarily sustainable, during the planning and the development phase of visitor sites, nature trails and ecotourism events, and also during their operation and implementation, the Directorate always focuses on nature conservation aspects and on the sustainable orientation of the visitors. Several international initiatives, such as the European Diploma for Protected Areas, EDEN, UNESCO Global Geoparks, UNESCO Biosphere Reserves or the IYST 2017 provide opportunities for the Directorate to enhance sustainability in its ecotourism activities.

EU funds provide possibilities for the Directorate to develop protected natural areas, visitor sites and ecotourism services. Presently 19 projects are underway, which requires considerable amount of human capacity in the fields of financial management, project management and expertise in planning and achieving the goals of the projects. The nature conservation aspects are taken into consideration within the Directorate's ecotourism oriented projects, for example by developing a common strategy for the sustainable management of tourism pressures and avoiding negative environmental impacts or by creating guidelines and quality and sustainability criteria regarding the organisation of events and the development of visitor centres and other elements of nature tourism infrastructure.

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<http://www.geopark.hu/en/home/ggn-info>



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