

# Pays: Montenegro



Prokletije – Montenegro



Mt. Arapit – Albania



Guri i Kuq – Kosova



Peace Park Project, usefully known now as just B3P, began its journey in 2001. Its destination? The

## ARE WE NEARLY THERE?

Parents setting out on a day's journey with young children will be all too familiar with this cry from the back of the car within a few miles of starting out. The Balkans

dream of a chain of national parks across the mountain range straddling Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo/a, their communities working together across the national borders to protect the environment and to develop sustainable mountain tourism.

14 years on, **“Are we nearly there?”** The answer is, **“No, not yet,”** but this year

there has been:

### A big step on the way

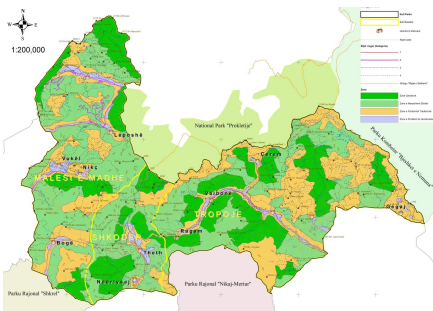
When we started out there were no maps in the region. So, as you see on the left, we had to make our own to explain what we wanted to achieve. By 2013 there were government approved national parks in Kosovo/a, the Bjeshkët e Nemuna NP, and in Montenegro, the Prokletije NP, but Albania only had its small areas in Thethi and

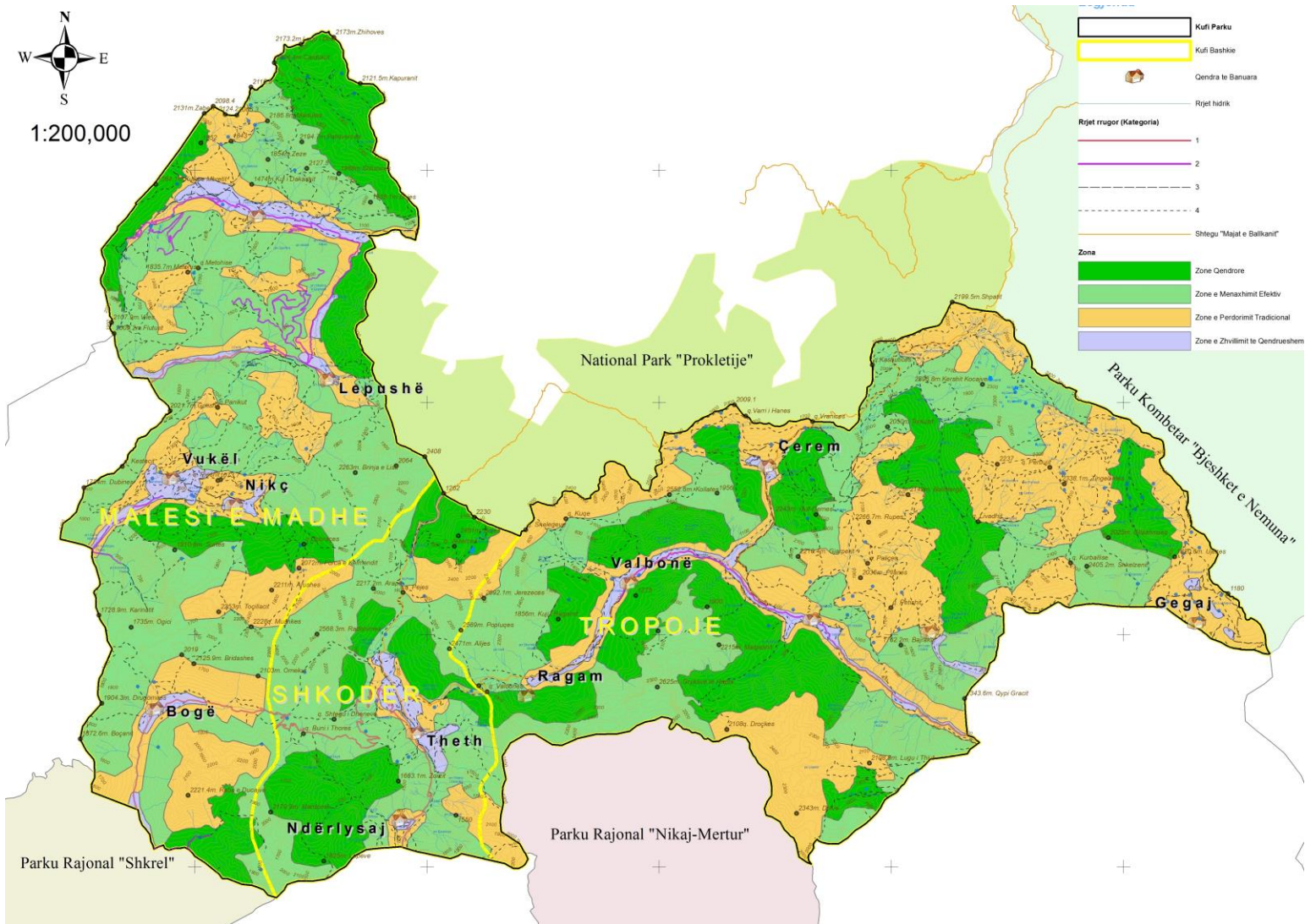
Valbona, national parks in name only, dating from the communist era. Now, in a major development,

the Albanian Ministry of the Environment, working with the German government organization GIZ, has produced this splendid map of what they call the Albanian Alps National Park”. It is printed again a bit larger on the next page.

### PARKU KOMBËTAR “ALPET E SHQIPËRISË”

Harta e zonimit të Parkut Kombëtar “Alpet e Shqipërisë”





The map shows clearly how the new proposed Albanian Alps National Park, covering a larger area of northern Albania than we had envisaged, abuts the existing national parks in Montenegro (pale green) and Kosovo/a (even paler green). The chain of national parks across the mountain region is now complete. On paper! We congratulate GIZ and the Environment Ministry on this hugely welcome plan and we wish it a speedy journey to full ratification by the Albanian government. The colour coding on the map means:

Dark green: Central Zone. Strictly protected conservation area.

Lighter green: Effective Management Zone. Controlled development of visitor facilities.

Yellow: Zone for traditional use. Controlled use and development of land and agriculture.

Purple: Zone for lasting development. Traditional practices of residents and businesses.

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## 2. 2016 SUMMER PROGRAMMES

We are pleased to announce the provisional but pretty firm dates for our Summer Programmes in 2016, including a new programme in Rugova, Kosovo/a, which means that for the first time since they started in 2008 we have SPs in all three countries of B3P. This early announcement should make it easier to attract a good number of international volunteers, as well as the inspirational volunteers from within the B3P countries who added so much to the programmes this year.

- 9<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> July                      Thethi, Albania
- 16<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> July                      Rugova , Kosovo/a, coordinated by Arber Jashari
- 23<sup>rd</sup> July – 6<sup>th</sup> August              Valbona, Albania
- 30<sup>th</sup> July – 13<sup>th</sup> August      Lëpushë
- 13<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> August                  Grbaje, Montenegro
- 20<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> August                  Babino Polje, Montenegro

These dates also mean that the programmes have the flexibility to run for a full week, if appropriate, not just five days.

## 1. CROSS-BORDER TREKKING, PEAKS OF THE BALKANS TRAIL

The Peaks of the Balkans trail, PoB for short, is the 190km circular, waymarked, trekking route through the whole mountain range in the B3P area. It was established in 2012 by GIZ and local action groups in each country, inspired, we like to think, by B3P's initiatives in cross-border trekking since 2003. Although there are plenty of variations on the PoB route to attract independent mountain trekkers and other routes to explore well away from it, for us in B3P it is a symbol for what we hoped for in the first place, international, cross-border cooperation bringing mountain visitors from abroad to enjoy the spectacular scenery and local culture and to put money into the local economy, leaving only the impact of their footprints on the environment. It has proved extremely popular. We do not know and can't calculate the numbers of people walking the trail or parts of it; many come in organized groups from alpine clubs in Italy, Germany, Holland and Austria, others come in smaller groups of friends from the UK and other countries. A handful of UK adventure travel companies now take groups on parts of the PoB. Hazarding a guess and waiting to be put right by statistics from another year, we suggest that between 500 and 1000 people a year are tackling parts or all of the trail. Even those whose backpacking days are over can appreciate the trail while their packs are taken for them to their destination each day by vehicle, horse or bus. There are issues to be faced, of course, inevitable when a route is used to this extent, such as trail maintenance, improved waymarking, developing a wider range of accommodation and camp sites for overnight stops, amending the map and directions, and, sadly, the removal of litter and garbage which is a big problem all over the region. There are several companies, individuals or organizations in the Balkans which help with arrangements for this or other treks in the region. They are included in the list on page 12 of this newsletter.

## 2. POLICE PERMISSION FOR UNOFFICIAL BORDER CROSSING

It is still necessary to get police permission in advance if you wish to cross the borders on the PoB or other trails in the B3P mountains. A meeting in Podgorica in 2011 between border police from the three countries and interested organizations agreed a system for obtaining the necessary permits. The principle is that you get permission from each country that you **leave**. It does work, sort of! People applying independently should download the application form for each country from the PoB or B3P website and e-mail it to the police addresses given. Do not expect a reply but make sure you have a copy



of your application with you. They don't like you applying more than a month in advance! The Kosovo/a police sometimes like the pleasant drive up the Rugova valley to check out a group over a breakfast coffee in the café at Kuçiste, but you are unlikely to meet any other border police on the trek. For a small fee the organizations listed on pages 12/13 can obtain the necessary permission for you. If you are booking a trek through them the permission is part of the package.

### 3. PAVLIN'S HOUSE IN THETHI



Pavlin Polia's house in Thethi is very well known to many of us in B3P, the house itself, Pavlin's family and the 'staff' in resplendent red t-shirts who help to create the super hospitable atmosphere there. Sadly, in April this year there was an accident which caused a huge fire and gutted the house. Luckily, no one was hurt and the family are safe. Funds were set up in the USA, in Germany and on the B3P Just Giving website to help Pavlin rebuild his house. On the understanding that it would be rebuilt in traditional style we sent out £1000, contributed by members of UK trekking groups who have stayed there. A further £200 from B3P is waiting to be taken out in person. Apart from compulsory 3<sup>rd</sup> party motor insurance, insurance is an unknown concept in Albania. We hear that the shell of the house is now rebuilt and that windows may, or may not, be in. Vlora and the children are in Kosovo/a with her parents while Pavlin battles on in Thethi, hoping to have it all ready for visitors next year. We wish him well and all the good luck he needs.

### 4. REVIEW OF TOURISM IN LEPUSHE AND VERMOSH

During our Summer Programmes in Lëpushë in the last three years we have often heard complaints from guesthouse owners and other residents that they were not getting enough visitors, that it was the bad roads keeping tourists away and that they hoped things would be better when the roads were properly surfaced. In the English lessons and in discussion with guesthouse owners the needs of visitors and how to meet them have been frequent topics. In 2014, in addition to the Summer Programme, we organised two meetings for guesthouse owners and others interested in developing tourism in the area – one in Vermosh, one in Lëpushë. These were supplemented by a series of informal meetings with local people to discuss how B3P might best work with them to achieve their aim of encouraging sustainable

tourism and creating a more sustainable economy in general. Consequently, we invited Dr Simon Woodward, Principal Lecturer in the School of Events, Tourism and Hospitality at Leeds Beckett University in the UK, to come to Lëpushë in 2015 at the time of the Summer Programme to cast his professional eye over the problems and possibilities. Simon has long been interested in the work of B3P. He readily agreed. We can't reproduce the whole of his report here, but here are some of the main points he makes.



### ABSTRACT

This short report, prepared for the Balkans Peace Park Project, reviews the current state of tourism in the North East of Kelmend Municipality, Albania, and identifies a range of opportunities for developing the industry in a responsible fashion, creating sustainable benefits for the host communities of Lepushe and Vermosh.

*Dr Simon C Woodward & Patricia Cliff*

School of Events, Tourism & Hospitality, Leeds Beckett University

### Some recommendations and conclusions

It is crucial that the communities in Lëpushë and Vermosh prepare for the completion of the new road surface, probably by 2017. B3P should work with other NGOs, such as VIS (the Italian NGO which is active in Vermosh), local businesses, the community and national agencies on issues like:

- **USP** = Unique Selling Point. Identify and agree on the most special feature of the area which will attract visitors and tourists.
- **Marketing**. This is expensive but use informal means such as Facebook and general awareness via B3P activities and other active organizations. Try the country's Destination Marketing Organization for national support.
- **Product Development**.
  - a) I.e. a wide range of possible activities to be offered: nature tourism, waymarked low-level walks, cycle touring, mountain biking, trekking, caving, rock climbing, painting and photography, plus winter sports: snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, etc.
  - b) Increase the number of guesthouses offering double, en-suite bedrooms for older couples who are prepared to pay a bit more.

- a. A food trail linking local farm producers
- **Environmental Management** Crucial for promoting the area as a high quality centre for outdoor activities. Importance of waste management, care of water sources, trail maintenance, etc.
  - **Tourist taxes and visitor payback schemes.** Consider inviting visitors to pay a bit more on top of their accommodation costs, the money raised to go into tourist information or development activities.
  - **Tourist information.** Build up information panels and produce leaflets, especially to attract visitors from Gusinje and Plav just across the Montenegro border. Open a tourist office.
  - **Business support.** Getting support from local businesses is essential. Get professional help or advice on upgrading guesthouses and the skills needed for other activities.
  - **Mountain guides.** Have a corps of trained guides in the area for mountain walking, winter activity and mountain biking, etc.

#### Further support

Simon based his report on only a week's visit, some desk research and conversations with several local business owners. He wasn't able to talk with government agencies or other NGOs, so input from them is not available. However, Simon's team has considerable experience of working in many emerging tourist destinations around the world, e.g. Scandinavia, the Middle East, South-East Asia and widely in Africa. The tourist team at Leeds Beckett University would be delighted to provide additional support to B3P and other partners in developing Kelmend as a thriving tourist area.

## 5. ANTONIA AND NIGEL YOUNG IN THE BALKANS

In July 2015, Antonia and Nigel worked on the fringes of the Valbona Summer Programme and were involved in meetings connected with B3P and making new contacts which were highly relevant to B3P.

### Shkodra

Here they put on a dinner at the San Francisco restaurant for 17 supporters of B3P and Summer Programme volunteers arriving. They welcomed two special guests, Alma Shkreli and Vildan Plepi, who had been interpreters and helpers on the B3P inaugural cross-border trek in 2003. They showed their B3P powerpoint presentation to residents at the Backpackers Hostel in Shkodra (Mi Casa es Tu

Casa) and they had valuable time with Arian Gjura, our main link with B3P Albania. They also prepared for a major meeting to be addressed by Professor Zef Gjeta (Tirana) and Dr. Simon Woodward (Leeds-Becket) on environmental issues in the B3P Albanian regions.

### **Valbona**

From Shkodra they travelled to Koman and then up Lake Koman to Fierze on one of the new ferries. All the party were volunteers for the Valbona SP, ably organized by Jonid Sula. In Valbona they showed the B3P presentation again in the 'Special Room' in the privately run Tourist Office, finding that for really up-to-date information one should go to the Centre run by [JourneytoValbona.com](http://JourneytoValbona.com). They met the three members of CHwB (Cultural Heritage without Borders) and two of Eco-Albania, both of who were to run workshops on the Summer Programme. While in Valbona they heard of a meeting called by GIZ for 35 stakeholders on the planned development of the Albanian Alps National Park. They were warmly welcomed to this crucial meeting where B3P had the first knowledge of the exciting plans as described at the start of this newsletter. We are pleased to have good contact with GIZ.

### **Kosovo/a**

From Valbona they travelled to Peja in Kosovo/a to meet up with Ellen Frank, another old friend from the inaugural trek in 2003, at ERA's (Environmentally Responsible Action) centre in Peja, and with Arber Jashari who was the leader of the Kosovar team which contributed so well to the Summer programme in Valbona. They were also able to see the work of CHwB in restored 'kullas' in Junik and other towns.

## **6. TREKKING IN SOUTHERN ALBANIA**



After many years of trekking in the mountains of B3P in the north, Richard Hargreaves was tempted to see what it was like in Southern Albania. In April, his group of 7 friends from the Fell and Rock Climbing Club flew to Corfu and crossed to Albania by ferry to Saranda for two weeks of mountain trekking, interspersed with 'cultural' days in World Heritage sites like Gjirokaster, Berat, Apollonia, Butrint and others. A rather less strenuous trip this time and with a lot of being driven around in a minibus, but it was nonetheless hugely enjoyable and fascinating to compare it with the whole atmosphere in northern



Albania. The treks of 4 days and 3 days followed the river valleys of Zagoria and Kurvelesh, with days over high cols to get to and from them at the beginning and end. The mountains were long continuous ridges above the river valleys without the spectacular 'crocodile teeth' peaks of the north. Tourism is much less developed than in the north and the political, historical and religious atmosphere is very different. However, Albanian *Coffee and raki for Jane and Endrit in Limar village* hospitality in family farmhouses is familiar: the welcome with çaj malit and raki, the copious suppers and breakfasts of all home produce, the feeling of sharing in family life each evening.

### Ottoman bridges and polyphonic singing



In Zagoria we loved the Ottoman bridges we saw each day with their high graceful arches with no parapets to stop you falling off them. The highlight in Kurvelesh was in the village of Terbaç where the family helped us to celebrate Paul's 70<sup>th</sup>

birthday with a performance of intense Albanian polyphonic singing, a quartet of male family members producing a sound combination of drone, oral percussion, melody and vocal line. We have recordings of this but, sadly, no still photo.

### A wartime memorial plaque



On the third day of the first trek in Zagoria, in the remote village of Nivan, we were surprised to come across a smart village water point with this memorial plaque. This was Tilman Square (Sheshi). Tilman is one of the great names of British



mountaineering in partnership with Eric Shipton in the years between the two World Wars. His war record was also remarkable: 4 years a gunnery officer on the Western Front in WW1, then WW2 at Dunkirk and El Alamein before volunteering to be parachuted into Albania in 1943 to liaise with the partisan forces against the Germans. I had read about this episode but hadn't remembered which part of Albania he had been in. At the next village, Sheper, where we stayed the night, we learned that Tilman had stayed there. Reading about him when we got home we found that Sheper had actually been his HQ during his 10 months in Albania and that many of the routes we walked and places we visited in peaceful 2015 Tilman had walked and fought over, 70 years before in 1943/44. Richard is preparing a Powerpoint talk on Tilman in Albania and maybe writing a journal article too.

### 'Zbulo' = 'Explore' in Albanian

This splendid trip was organized for us by Zbulo, the adventure travel company, run by Endrit Shima and Ricardo Fahrig in Tirana. It was carefully worked out in detail over several months of e-mail correspondence with them. Endrit himself accompanied us as our guide for the first half of the trip as far as Berat, where he handed over to Erenik Selmani for the second half from Berat to Saranda. Both were excellent, knowledgeable guides and great companions. Erenik, especially, had a passionate interest in the archaeology and the history of the area, giving us valuable insight into the transition from the rule of communist dictator Enver Hoxha (1944 – 1985) to the turbulent post-communist era which followed it, as he interpreted the landscape and buildings for us.

## 7. HELPFUL ORGANIZATIONS FOR TREKKING, ETC.

For readers of this newsletter who might be interested in visiting the B3P or other regions of those three countries we list here the people and organizations whose help we really appreciate.

a) **Kosova Outdoor** [www.kosovaoutdoor.com](http://www.kosovaoutdoor.com) Lendita Hyseni, [leahyseni@gmail.com](mailto:leahyseni@gmail.com), and her husband Adnan set up this company in Peja. She works closely with Admir Lalić in Plav/Gusinje

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,Montenegro, [info@prokletije.com](mailto:info@prokletije.com), and Pavlin Polia in Thethi, Albania, [pavpolia@gmail.com](mailto:pavpolia@gmail.com), arranging routes, guides, accommodation, travel and baggage transfer, for individuals or groups intending to trek the PoB or other adventures in the B3P region. It was Lendita who pioneered for us the different ways to transfer the packs of those who no longer go in for full backpacking treks and her friendly, highly professional help is a great example of cross-border cooperation. She can help you to explore other towns and areas of Kosova, the cultures and traditions of Rugova valley and is an advocate of the Slow Food International movement [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com) in Kosova. Lendita is also a good contact for getting police cross-border permission from Kosovo/a.

b) **Admir Lalić** [info@prokletije.com](mailto:info@prokletije.com) is the Information and Education Specialist at the Prokletije National Park Visitors Centre in Gusinje, Montenegro. He can arrange tours, guides, accommodation and transport for trekkers and visitors and is the best contact for getting police permission for cross-border trekking from Montenegro.

c) **Zbulo** [www.zbulo.com](http://www.zbulo.com) Endrit Shima, [endrit.shima@gmail.com](mailto:endrit.shima@gmail.com), and his colleague Ricardo Fahrig, [ricardo@zbulo.org](mailto:ricardo@zbulo.org) from their office in Tirana offer a wide range of mountain and cultural adventures in Albania, especially, but also the PoB trail and other travel in Kosovo/a and Montenegro. Their close associate for Montenegro is the well qualified mountain guide Vlatko Bulatović, [welcomes@zalas.me](mailto:welcomes@zalas.me). Endrit was very much in the forefront in establishing the PoB trail in 2011/2012 and the map which goes with it. Like Lendita they provide a very friendly and professional service. For a small fee they offer to get police permission for border-crossing for all three countries.

### Other organizations

Apart from the cross-border trekking, there are other people and organizations with whom we have varying degrees of contact and whose work across the borders in the B3P for environmental conservation, sustainable development and environmental education of young people we warmly appreciate. These include:

- b. **ERA** (Environmentally Responsible Action) [www.eradirect.org](http://www.eradirect.org) Fatos Lajçi and Ellen Frank run this longstanding group from their beautifully restored Haxhi Mill Environmental Education Centre in Peja, Kosovo/a. They seek to increase environmental consciousness, awareness, and responsibility amongst the youth and community of Kosovo/a in order to protect, conserve and promote the region's natural and cultural heritage. They like to take groups of young people from different countries

to share outdoor experience at centres they have built high in the mountains above Rugova.

- c. **American Embassies** in Tirana, Podgorica and Pristina which have given money to help fund the B3P Summer Programmes in Thethi, in Plav/Grbaje and by enabling Kosovar volunteers to take part in the programme in Valbona, Albania. We are deeply grateful for this financial help and the interest which the embassies take in what the programmes seek to do.
- d. **B3P Albania** Thanks to Arian Gjura in Shkodra handling the complicated finances it was B3PA which set up the Summer Programme in Thethi this year.
- e. **GIZ** (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) the German government development organization. It was the backing of GIZ that lay behind the establishment of the PoB trail and the meeting to get agreement on cross-border police permission in 2011. Now they have put their influence and money to good use in working with the Albanian Environment Ministry to make progress towards the creation of the Albanian Alps National Park.
- f. **CHwB** [www.chwb.org](http://www.chwb.org) (Cultural Heritage without Borders) This NGO is dedicated to rescuing and preserving cultural heritage affected by conflict, neglect or human and natural disaster. They work especially in Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo/a. We were delighted to meet this organization this year and to have their input with workshops on two of our Summer Programmes.
- g. **Eco-Albania** [www.ecoalbania.org](http://www.ecoalbania.org) The centre for Protection of the Natural Ecosystems in Albania (Eco-Albania) is an NGO, created in December 2014 as a joint initiative of professors of the Department of Biology of the Tirana University and the "Save the Blue Heart of Europe" team in Albania. It works to strengthen the friendly coexistence of man and nature in Albania. Again, we were delighted to have their workshops as part of the Valbona SP.

## 8. B3P UK COMMITTEE CHANGES

At the AGM in Leeds on November 7<sup>th</sup> we agreed a number of changes to the committee structure. It is a fact of life for voluntary organizations like ours that it is already busy and committed people who add yet another commitment to their lives. And often these other commitments take over so that they have to choose which ones to stay with and which ones to drop. Last year Ann Kennard

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who had been our wonderful chairperson for several years had to give that up and after a year as President she has had to step down from that as well. Ann is still a good friend of B3P and will keep in close touch with us. We are very grateful for all the work she did and the visits to the Balkans which she fitted in to her life. Peter Spafford took over as chairperson for 2014/2015 but he too has had to step down because of other commitments. So, our new committee structure to take us forward into 2016 is:

Nigel Young	Chairperson
Antonia Young	Secretary for Communication
Angela Selmani	Secretary for Administration and Volunteers
John Milsom	Treasurer
Richard Hargreaves	Newsletter
	Editor and Information on Trekking, etc.

Gill Akhtar, who has coordinated Summer Programmes in Thethi and this year in Valbona, is keen to work on 2016 programmes if her teaching job in Edinburgh makes it possible. Sadly, Sylvia Shatwell, who has worked so well with people in Montenegro to get SPs going there for two years, has had to resign. She may be able to join us again in future years.

**Envie d'aller faire du volontariat au Monténégro ? Contactez le SVI :**  
**[info@servicevolontaire.org](mailto:info@servicevolontaire.org) ou visitez notre site :**  
**[www.servicevolontaire.org](http://www.servicevolontaire.org) !**