



Inspiring Rural Heritage:
Sustainable Practices
to Protect and Conserve
Upland Landscapes and Memories

Project IRIS - Inspiring rural heritage: sustainable practices to protect and conserve upland landscapes and memories

Closing Conference

20 October 2023, Kolašin, Montenegro

Conclusions and Recommendations from the Sinjajevina workshop

The Closing Conference of the European project IRIS “Inspiring Rural Heritage: Sustainable practices for the protection and preservation of mountain landscapes and memories” was organised in Kolašin, Montenegro, from 19-21 October 2023. The key day of the IRIS project closing conference concerning Montenegro was Friday, October 20, when the **Sinjajevina Workshop** was organised. The **goal** was to use this workshop as a platform for discussion with key actors and various experts about the future potential protection, heritage enhancement and community centred and participated sustainable development of Sinjajevina, which could also be an inspiration for other mountain areas of Montenegro and the Balkans.

There were **nearly 50 participants** at the Sinjajevina Workshop, including representatives of IRIS project partners from France, Italy, Spain and the UK along with international experts from Croatia, Italy and Albania, as well as different local and national actors related to Sinjajevina, including representatives from Ministry of Culture, Administration for Heritage Protection, Environmental Protection Agency, University of Montenegro, municipalities of Kolašin, Mojkovac, Žabljak and Danilovgrad, National park Biogradska gora, different NGOs including Regional Development Agency for Bjelasica, Komovi and Porokletije, Center for the Study and Protection of Birds of Montenegro, Fondation Petrovitch Njegosh, Peaks of Montenegro, Natura, Sinjavinski Marathon and Save Sinjajevina as well as representatives of local communities. At the conference there were also the main representatives from the donor Joint Programming Initiative on Cultural Heritage and Global Change (JPI CH), secretary general and chair, that were at the same time representing the French Ministry of Culture of which they make part of.

The first part of the workshop included presentations about results of the IRIS project in the case study area of Sinjajevina, which was then followed by presentations about opportunities for Sinjajevina by national actors centred on nature protection, cultural heritage and rural tourism, then by presentations about local perspectives by municipalities and local communities linked to Sinjajevina, and closed by important and inspirational international perspectives from Croatia and Spain. The Workshop on Sinjajevina was finalised with **work in groups**, where participants of the closing conference discussed together about **key issues related to Sinjajevina**:

- **Agriculture and rural development.**
- **Management issues, land property and use rights.**
- **Protection of nature and biodiversity.**
- **Protection of living heritage.**



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The groups that consisted of experts from various countries and backgrounds, academics, NGOs, decision makers and local community representatives, came up with a **series of recommendations to enhance the protection, heritage enhancement and community centred and participated sustainable development of Sinjajevina.**

Work group on agriculture and rural development

Agriculture and rural development are crucial for the future and sustainable development of Sinjajevina pastures and katuns. Support needs to be provided to local community that is still keeping traditional agricultural practices at katuns, very particularly for their unique value in terms of quality production and environmental sustainability. The upcoming opportunities in Montenegro that are related to EU LEADER programme are very important in that sense, especially through possibility for formation of Local Action Groups (LAGs). Through the activities of Network for Rural Development of Montenegro information about that process is already being shared, and from the side of local communities, willingness for formation of **LAG Sinjajevina** already exists. But the process needs to continue building, especially when formal conditions for LAG formation in Montenegro will be defined. Few recommendations regarding that aspect would be as follows.

Sinjajevina is administratively covering the territory of four municipalities: Kolašin, Mojkovac, Žabljak and Šavnik, but additionally is also linked with Bijelo Polje and Danilovgrad municipalities from where some herders families using katuns on Sinjajevina are coming. Related to future LAG Sinjajevina **composition**, it should consist of a maximum of 49% representation from public sector, and a minimum of 51% representation from the civil and private sector, that should involve various stakeholders including: producers groups (e.g., producers of traditional creme - *skorup*, Kolašinski layered cheese, etc.), Cattle Breeders Union, local NGOs, Mountaineers clubs, schools along with other local entities. The composition of this type should ensure a strong involvement of local stakeholders who are deeply connected to the region's needs. **Diverse stakeholder engagement** and the **participatory approach** in the process of LAG formation and management, as well as other processes related to rural development, are extremely important.

One of the first steps should be the development of an **area-based strategy - local action strategy** for Sinjajevina. This strategy should encompass the following key aspects:

- **Infrastructure development**, including improvements in water supply, roads, internet connectivity, implementation of solar energy systems and tourism trails.
- **Capacity building** initiatives, such as organizing summer schools, study tours, and adult training programs.
- Promoting **innovation** in agriculture and rural development.
- **Marketing and branding** efforts to create a distinct "Sinjajevina" label through quality schemes.
- **Cultural heritage preservation and promotion**, including organizing local festivals and supporting traditional and new handicrafts.
- Measures to **empower young people in katuns**, including training opportunities, apprenticeships, and support programs.



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- **Advocacy and engagement with policymakers** to address challenges faced by the traditional cheese industry.
- **Expanding agricultural production while preventing environmental degradation.**
- **Collaborating and networking** with other LAGs for shared knowledge and resources.
- Developing **processing and storage facilities for agricultural products.**
- Promoting **diversification of agricultural products** to reduce reliance on a single commodity.
- Creating **activities for children in katuns** to support local families and maintain community vitality.
- Organizing a **Sinjajevina cheese fair** to showcase and celebrate local produce.

A holistic and community-driven approach to agriculture and rural development in Sinjajevina must be encouraged and supported, and opportunities related to future LAG Sinjajevina, by involving a broad range of stakeholders can contribute to the sustainable growth and preservation of this valuable area.

Work group on management issues, land property and use rights

In Sinjajevina there are different types of land ownership and property rights, but still big part of the land is common, managed by customary law, that is not recognised by formal legal system. Therefore, there is a proposal to enhance situation regarding the property and land right issues through:

- Changing the existing laws: Law on ownership rights and Law on state ownership, maybe through the creation one day of a National Land Coalition in favour of katuns of Montenegro, currently in the stage of strategy building.
- Making a new law Lex specialis, Law on katuns
- Documenting and re-claiming ownership / use right by those most keen in doing so and with most chances of winning such claims, so that this can maybe create a precedent, and therefore a model and spearhead for other future claims on community land rights.
- Public tenders for the pastoral land that is formally state or municipal should include a criteria that would give advantage to current traditional users, and disadvantage foreigners in front of local communities.
- Constantly take into consideration traditional governance structures that should be present as an option in existing public tenders for the state/municipality owned land, or in available funding from the agricultural budget. For example, EU directives for the second consecutive programming period recognize and stimulate collective approach (e.g. pastoral commons or coordinated actions) as a way to be more effective in environmental protection in agriculture)

The legal recommendations for Sinjajevina would be **to find innovative ways to sustain traditional practices by incorporating them in existing legal framework since katuns are clearly champions of sustainable use of natural resources.** At the same time, new legal frameworks adapted to integral katun protection and promotion are also another possible important way through.



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Work group on protection of nature and biodiversity

The area of Sinjajevina is characterised by significant values for biodiversity. It is a **unique landscape**, a vast pasture on the mountain plateau that due to its specific geomorphology is perceived as a "**green sea**". Sinjajevina have an important **botanical value**. Different types of landscape are present: fragments of forests, wet areas, soils/grass, rocky areas (cliffs, screes or rocky pastures, There, specific habitats were created, which supports diversity of plants, microorganisms, soil microorganisms including fungi and bacteria for example, insects, birds, reptiles, mammals, etc. More studies at biodiversity level are needed, as well as at ecosystem services and functional traits, along with nutritional value of grasses for livestock, pollen-based research for understanding evolution of Sinjajevina upland landscapes, reconstruction of the past vegetation cover up to the present, etc.

Some of the most significant **threats** to biodiversity that are recognised are:

- Mass tourism, characterized by activities like off-roading and the influx of large numbers of people into the mountainous areas.
- Potential construction of windmills, while a source of renewable energy, disrupts the natural landscape and wildlife, particularly for birds while Sinjajevina has been proposed as a EU Natura 2000 protected area, being one of its main reasons its value for migratory birds.
- The use of antibiotics and other modern medicines in livestock, that raises concern about their impact on the natural ecosystem.
- Forest regeneration is only really happening for now on the margins. Conversely, it can increase biodiversity and provide firewood for the shepherds. However, even if the threat of substitution of grasslands by woodlands (and therefore the loss of a unique thousands years old pastoral ecosystem and biodiversity), is not imminent, these are processes that happen within one century cycles or less, while solutions to this cannot be implemented at immediate level. If you lose pastoralism you will lose the best tool against the return of the forest into thousands of years old co-evolved pastoral ecosystem. Therefore, the threat of the return of the forest is not immediate but the threat of the disappearance of the most important tool against it, is imminent (e.g. the disappearance of pastoralism) and therefore we must still need for an urgent reaction to this.

To preserve this unique biodiversity, **recommendations** would include:

- **Maintaining or increasing the presence of shepherds in the katuns** and
- **Supporting their way of life** in the katuns through services, infrastructure and greater subventions planned in a **sustainable way**
- **Increase research in different aspects of biodiversity and ecology of Sinjajevina and of katuns in general.**
- **Increase international scientific collaboration about that matter**

Also, based on natural values of Sinjajevina, Environmental Protection Agency of Montenegro in 2016, co-financed in two thirds by the European Union, prepared the "Study of protection and establishment of a protected natural property in the area of Sinjajevina" by which it is proposed that Sinjajevina should be



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protected as a **Regional Natural Park**, since administratively it is situated at the territory of four municipalities: Kolašin, Mojkovac, Žabljak and Šavnik.

By a **Law on Nature Protection before 2016 local self-governments / municipalities, jointly initiate the process of protection**, while **proclamation of protected area was supposed to be done by each municipality separately**. Unfortunately, proclamation of Sinjajevina as Natural Park still did not happen, probably also due to the complex administrative procedures with four municipalities and the declaration of a military ground in 2019 over an important part of these highlands.

Through some current concrete practices in other protected areas in Montenegro, it has been shown that the legal model before 2016 is not effective.

According to changes in Law on Nature Protection **after 2016, municipalities still jointly initiate the process of protection**, but **proclamation of protected area is done by Government once it has the agreement of all municipalities**:

„A nature park located in the area of several local self-government units is declared by the Government on the proposal of the local self-government unit/s in whose territory it is located, with the previously obtained opinion of the Ministry and state administration authorities responsible for agriculture, forestry and water management and for cultural affairs.“ (Article 34, Law on Nature Protection)

Therefore, even if the process of protection of Sinjajevina as Nature Park started in 2016, according to the Law on Nature Protection at that time by which proclamation should be done by each municipality, **the proposal of this work group is that the process re-starts again according to updated current Law on Nature Protection**, so that municipalities still jointly initiate the process of protection but proclamation of protected area is done by Government which would facilitate bridging any possible conflict or misunderstanding between municipalities.

One of the key issues related to future protection area is its management and governance. It is recommended that the **governance/management body** that will be established for Sinjajevina should be **multi stakeholder** governance body and not uniquely municipal. That body should consist of representatives of all municipalities that are linked to Sinjajevina, administratively and/or by usage, relevant experts and the civil sector, with a particularly important presence of representatives of local communities and pastoralists.

Work group on protection of living heritage

Sinjajevina with its katuns and katun way of life represent **valuable cultural landscape with maintained living heritage practices**. Dealing with this **exceptional mountain heritage** requires a **holistic approach**.

The aim would be to protect valuable heritage of Sinjajevina in its all aspects, tangible and intangible, by maintaining those valuable practices and landscapes. **Formal protection/ declaration**, first at the national and then possibly also international level, are important steps in that direction.



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First positive steps in that direction are made, having in mind that The Administration for the Protection of Cultural Property of Montenegro in 2021 has accepted initiative for protection of *Katunovanje* or *tradition of ascension to katuni* as intangible heritage at national level, and that they included activities related to this process in the annual program for 2024. It is important that in parallel to the process of formal recognition at national level, Montenegro also can start process of joining already inscribed *Transhumance, the seasonal droving of livestock along migratory routes in the Mediterranean and the Alps* at the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In that sense assistance offered from international partners that have experience in such process, particularly from Spain and from France that have visited Sinjajevina and participated in the Workshop can be very significant and have expressed their full availability for collaboration and supporting such processes in Montenegro.

Formal protection of Sinjajevina tangible and intangible heritage of course should not be an aim in itself, but protection of those values through **activities** that shaped and maintained them.

This very sensitive and fragile mountain heritage needs careful approach. In order to contribute to protection of cultural heritage some additional **research** can be useful, in order to justify values and continuity of life in katun areas, and support future processes.

In parallel **sustainable development and resilient empowerment of local communities** of the area is very important, dealing with tourism, production, agriculture, food, gastronomy, that needs to take into consideration heritage values adequately.

In order to maintain living heritage and keep valuable built heritage and cultural landscape, **community participation is essential** in all the processes. The special focus should be given on **transferring knowledge** and **involving of young people**, which implies at the same time offering opportunities to continue in an well-ordered and coordinated way.

In parallel the **internationalization** of those processes can be very useful, through the collaboration with international experts and their assistance, which would give the heritage of katuns wider dimension and even make of Montenegro a light-house and a referent in this arena, while attracting increasing attention.

In general, **communicating** the values and importance of heritage to **decision makers**, and all other actors of society is very important, as well as establishing **platform for collaboration**. Dissemination of knowledge and values can be supported by using new technologies (e.g. GIS).

Collaboration of all actors in the process is essential. **Support and funds** for all activities are needed if the protection of this fragile but invaluable and multidimensional heritage (e.g. food production, animal and pastoral management, landscape management, co-habitation rules between pastoralists in the highlands, cultural recites and practices, etc.) is to be effective and not lost for ever.