

The natural and cultural assets for preserving the natural environment in Nemuna Mountains National Park

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ABSTRACT

The natural resources and cultural heritage of Deçan area are very important for the preservation of the natural environment. These properties include wonderful natural landscapes such as cliffs, forests and rivers, which provide shelter for a wide range of fauna and wild hair. The cultural heritage of the area, including the Orthodox churches and monasteries of the 14th century, as well as the architectural values of the authentic villages, are irreplaceable and must be protected for future generations. The preservation of these natural and cultural assets is important to ensure that income and resources from tourism and other economic activities in the area are sustainable and expandable over time. In addition, the preservation of the natural environment and cultural heritage is part of our shared responsibility towards cultural heritage and ensures that future generations have the opportunity to enjoy and breathe in the valuable assets of Deçan. Bottom of FormThe study in this paper focuses on the importance of sustainable use of natural resources - surface water resources and the need for their effective management to preserve the integrity of this important natural and cultural area of Nemuna Mountains National Park. The purpose of this paper is to inform about the reality we have in this field, to promote these resources we have, their importance for the region, as well as to somehow influence the mobilization of citizens and all actors – responsible for preserving, using and promote these natural assets that are important to us in general. Therefore, strategies must be created by the Government of Kosovo to preserve and promote these natural and cultural assets for the benefit of our country.

Keywords: natural assets, Nemuna mountains, sustainable use, heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Deçan Mountains is one of the richest municipalities with natural, monumental, historical-cultural heritage in Kosovo. Its beautiful nature, as well as the various monumental objects of historical importance of the cultural heritage in Deçan, which date from early times, make this town special and important in Kosovo and beyond. Deçan stands out in the region as a tourist-recreational center. The rare natural beauties in the region give this environment special characteristics in the Dukagjin Plain and beyond in Kosovo (Vishaj, 2014; Mutaqin and Dharin, 2024). Nemuna Mountains National

Park are one of the most beautiful and important natural areas in Kosovo. This area is known for its amazing landscapes, rich biodiversity, and its historical and cultural role in the lives of local people in this region and beyond. In this study, we will deeply examine the importance of this area as a natural heritage and we will analyze through a scientific perspective with special emphasis the economic and cultural role of these mountains in this region and the measures that have been taken and should be taken for protection and promotion of this natural and „national” wealth. The natural resources of Decan offer opportunities for the development of mass tourism, as well as alternative ones. In addition

to these resources, extremely favorable tourist sites, there are also archaeological sites, which were used as settlements in prehistoric times, such as the village of Belle and the great cave. The variety of activities make this type of tourism offer tourists a very coveted tourist product. However, the use and good organization of these destinations still remains far from optimal levels. In order to achieve a higher level of development, points are needed first, the increase in the number of investors, as well as a better infrastructure. Also, it is important to draft and implement guiding policies for the development of this highly coveted branch of the economy, which would bring a lot of income and economic development. To achieve all this, a strong cooperation between the residents of these areas, as well as the central and local government, is necessary. The factors that influence the tourist attraction, namely mountain tourism in Deçan are: natural resources, social resources, cultural resources, archaeological values, etc. Deçan is considered one of the municipalities with the most abundant resources for the development of mass and alternative tourism, so experts in this field, especially those who operate within state institutions, should find opportunities to attract investments, even from abroad. Deçan resources enable the development of tourism both during the winter and summer seasons. Climatic conditions, relief, flora and fauna, hydrography, Deçan gorge, forests, are just some of the characteristics of this municipality that enable sustainable development of all types of tourism (KK Deçan, 2018; MINT, 2018)

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative methodology will help to improve the deep understanding of the impact of natural assets and cultural heritage on the preservation of the natural environment, by combining interviews, observations and analysis of official documentation through adequate municipal and central institutions, we will be able to obtain a range of wide range of data that will give us a complete and comprehensive overview of cultural heritage and its role in preserving the natural environment. The methodology used in the paper is based on an in-depth analysis of the existing literature, including scientific studies, environmental agency reports, and other published or

published development and historical documents that directly or indirectly describe this region (Deçan Mountains). In addition, a field survey interview that was used to document the current condition of the mountains and to measure their impact on this environment. This methodology is mixed data which derives the description of these phenomena through secondary data obtained from reports and other relevant documentation drawn up and promoted by various governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, as well as the resignation of the primary data which is extracted through interviews directly in the field and to harmonize the data towards the explanation of this humluntuse topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nemuna Mountains National Park, is one of the most precious natural assets that Kosovo has, whose values include biological and landscape diversity that exceed the borders of our country (MESP, 2020). Their harshness and undamaged nature until a few decades ago, has awakened the curiosity of many scientific researchers, foreign and local from different fields: botanist, zoologist, geologist, geographer, etc. including the various guides who have passed through these parts (Veselaj, 2010). The Nemuna Mountains National Park, with its position in the North-West of the country, is part of the mountains of the same name (or also known as the Alpine Alps), which also extend to three neighboring countries, in Republic of Kosovo, Albania and Mali. In Kosovo, this park extends to the municipalities of Istog, Pejë, Deçan, Junik and Gjakovë and has an area of 63,028 hectares (MMPHI, 2022). Divided by municipalities: Istog (8.1%), Pejë (52.1%), Deçan (26.6%), Junik (8.4%), Gjakovë (4.8%). The National Park Nemuna Mountains presents a geographical region of rare beauty, with a great wealth of landscape elements such as: high mountains bare with snow on the tops, impressive forests with different types of trees where tall pines dominate with beauty, fascinating valleys and amazing deep gorges, pastures and meadows with flowers of all colors, numerous water sources and streams that form ravines and rivers, beautiful caves and fabulous lakes (MEPH, 2020). These mountains have been declared a National Park, after a series of consultations and discussions

at the central and local level of government and with the community, a draft law is drawn up and the Assembly of Kosovo, in December 2012, approves the Law on the Nemuna Mountains National Park with what and the way is opened for the design of the spatial plan for this park (MMPHI, 2022; Sinh, 2024) (Figure 1). Bješkët of Deçan. These mountains are also part of the Nemuna Mountains National Park, which lie in the west of Kosovo. The Deçani foothills, as part of the “Nemuna foothills” national park, have a significant area of forests and pastures of 16,786 ha or 27% (GLV Gjeravica, 2019). From the total area of the Municipality of Deçan, there are 288.40 km² or 28.840 ha of which: 8,940.4 ha of fertile land, 14.420 ha of forest and 5,479.6 ha of pasture land (Municipality of Deçan, 2022). National parks play an important role in preserving the environment due to several main reasons: Maintaining biodiversity: National parks provide the right environment for a variety of balanced natural life. This includes rare species of flora and fauna that use these areas as their natural habitat. Conservation of natural landscapes: National parks protect unique and irreplaceable natural landscapes, including mountains, rivers, forests and coastal areas. These facilities provide important ecological services such as water filtration, soil conservation and oxygen production. Impact on climate: Conservation of large natural areas, such as national parks, helps reduce climate change. These areas help absorb carbon dioxide and regulate the local and global climate. Education and sustainable tourism: National parks are important centers for outdoor education and sustainable tourism. By attracting visitors who appreciate nature and culture, they help raise public awareness of the importance

of environmental conservation. Protection from human interference: Being legally protected areas, national parks offer protection from harmful human interference such as illegal construction, illegal exploitation of natural resources and habitat degradation. For these reasons, national park conservation and management are important to ensure that natural and cultural values remain rich and widespread for future generations. Through the protection of these areas, it can be ensured that income and well-being from tourism and nature-related economic activities are sustainable and comprehensive over time. Top of Form Bottom of Form.

Nemuna Mountains represent an important natural and cultural asset for Kosovo. While their biodiversity is rich and variable, surface waters play a key role in the conservation of this area. Due to their impact on the local climate, these waters provide a suitable environment for the development of rare fauna and flora. They also offer the development of mountain tourism (summer and winter), cultural tourism (Belleja) and livestock development. While these mountains stand out for the many waters (sources) they have, their waters are used for the development of the lives of the local residents, the water is used for drinking and household, agriculture, hydropower, industry, etc. The area of these mountains is also made special by various historical and cultural objects, such as historical and cultural monuments, within the park there is also the Monastery of Deçan (MEPH, 2020). Belleja is a historical settlement, presenting a rich archaeological historical and cultural heritage. Plecja, during the summer, is a (summer) residence with summer stalls (tebana) as well and the other slopes are used during the summer. These natural assets have led to the



Figure 1. Road to Mountain – Gryka e Deçani

development of many traditional activities important to our traditional life and culture in the mountains of Deçan, such as: the use of pastures, tourism (summer, winter and health), the use of plants – fruit picking mountain, such as the chestnut as an important natural and cultural heritage value traditionally associated with local residents. Cultivating and harvesting chestnuts creates material goods for families. All of these are accompanied by rites, games and various folk festivals such as: zhdjergat, lama dinner, sheep shearing, etc., which must have left their mark throughout our history (Figure 2).

The cultural heritage in this part of Deçan, the monastery Belleja, Pleqja, etc. Belleja as a settlement appears to have been mentioned since ancient times, Belleja is the arecological and historical locality in the Deçani Gorge, which should be researched and studied. In Belle there are still traces of three small Illyrian-Albanian churches or chapels, two castles, etc. (Mehmetaj, 2022). The tourist resort today offers culture, tradition and history and nature (Figure 3).

The Monastery of Deçan is an Orthodox church built in the Romanesque-Gothic (western) construction style. This monastery is built in Gryka e Deçani, by the river. The monastery of Deçan began to be built in 1327. The old buildings that are found in the monastery complex even today are continuously restored, for the values that it has constantly visited, It is on the list and protected by UNESCO (Vishaj, 2014). In this area, tourism is focused on creating accommodations where visitors will have the opportunity to be in contact with the residents, the lifestyle and the local cuisine (Hasanaj and Kuqi 2022) (Figure 4).

Nemuna Mountains summer estates, great importance for residents, summer use, for grazing, for health, for growing plants, etc. Over the centuries, the inhabitants have experienced life, the good things of life in the mountains, there they have created their own and their families' history, games, traditions and rituals (the games of shepherds, shearers, chikas, they have also created festivals, various traditional games, fleeces, djjergat these rites accompanied by songs, dances



Figure 2. Sheep shearing – traditional rite



Figure 3. Belle Village

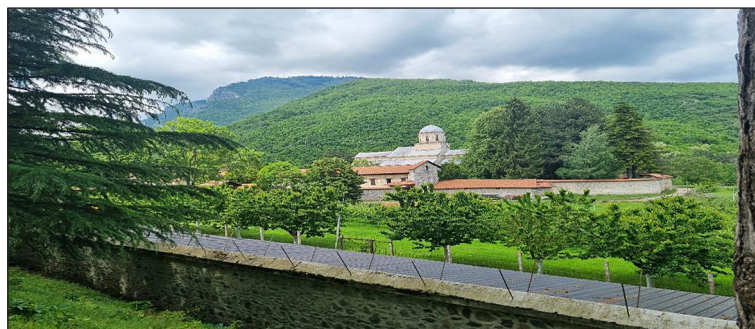


Figura 4. Monastery of Deçan

(which today have turned into traditional parties) and the best traditional foods. So, in themselves they preserve, promote and develop many cultural values. Knowing that these are resources natural resources also have an important cultural potential for the region.

In general, the nature of this municipality, as well as the special geocirculating position, gives exceptional touristic and recreational values and potential throughout the calendar year for the development of three basic forms of tourism (EM invest, 2012).

Development of tourism – the Municipality of Deçan is divided into four tourist areas: the tourist area of the city of Deçan and its surroundings, the tourist area of the Deçan Gorge (Belegu), the tourist area of the Lloqani Gorge and the tourist area of Bješkeve i Strellci. Geographical position, climate, tourist transit directions, natural heritage complexes and assets and cultural, hunting localities and villages offer opportunities for the development of these types of tourism (TAG, 2008).

Waters in Nemuna Mountains National Park are an enviable asset. The national park area has a fairly dense hydrographic network. The main rivers in the park are: Istog River, Lumbardhi i Peja, Deçani, Lloqani, Ereniku, etc. The park also has several small rivers, as well as several permanent and temporary streams (Figure 5). All the watercourses of the park have a direction of flow west – east and southeast which are discharged into the river Drini i Bardhë which is the main catchment of the Dukagjin Basin. The rivers are joined by a large number of streams, small rivers and streams on both sides (MESP, 2020). Even Deçan and its surroundings are rich in surface and underground water flows. All the rivers and ravines in the territory of the Municipality of Deçan flow in the direction of the „White Drin”. Among the main rivers of the park are the two rivers of the Deçan mountains, the Deçan River and the Lloqan River, the Vokš streams, and the Behovci Stream (Lokaj, 2019).

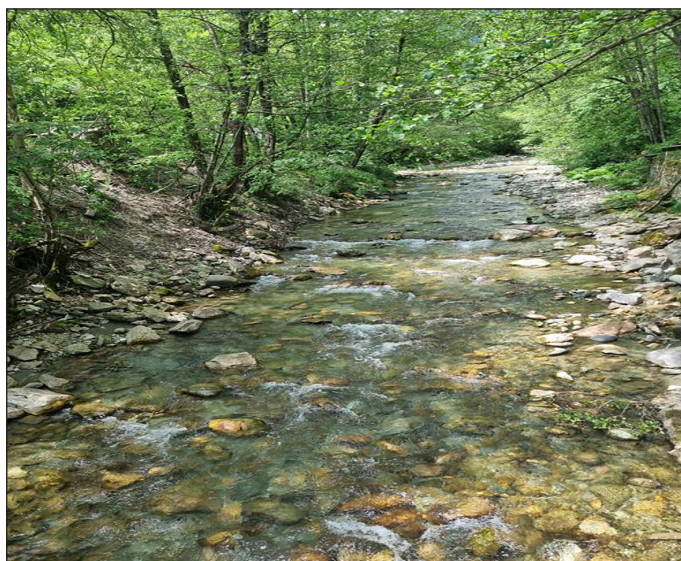


Figure 5. The stream of Lumbardhi of Deçan

Lumbardhi of Deçan, formed by two rivers; Kozhnjeri (right) and Marjas (left). It has a catchment area of 278.3 km². It is a mountain river and forms a narrow and deep valley with an average upstream gradient of 80 m/km. Measurements at the hydrometric station of Deçan have shown that the inflow-flow (output-removal) of water are: $Q = 4.64 \text{ m}^3/\text{s}$. The water flow of $4.64 \text{ m}^3/\text{s}$ indicates a volume of water outflow (removal) through surface runoff (river) of $146.32 \cdot 10^6 \text{ m}^3$ (QRM-REC, 2012).

Lumbardhi i Lloqani, has a length of 23.7 km that originates from the slopes of Kurvalla, Dervishkom and of Stanishta Zog at an altitude of 2100 m above sea level. The basin of River of L. of Lloqan crosses the villages of Hulaj, Lloqan, Carrabreg i Epërm, Prejlep, Rastavicë, Baballoq, Gramaçel and Jasiq. This river, in addition to irrigating the fields of these villages, its water is used to irrigate the fields of many other villages as well, such as: Pobërgja, Voksh, Sllup, Drenoc, etc. (Municipality of Deçan, 2022).

Mineral water – sour (Gushavcit). The source of mineral water is one of the most important tourist products that Deçani has. This asset offers opportunities to the Municipality of Deçan, for the development of infrastructure for the treatment of infectious diseases, skin diseases, bone diseases, etc. The mineral source is in the limestone massif, on the left side of the river. It is a karst type source. Water, from these limestones, emerges from some cracks and fissures on the surface of the earth and some in the alluvium of the river. The capacity of the mineral resource, according to a test pumping, proved that there are large flows from the resource. Tourism is an economic activity or a set of co-ordinated activities aimed at meeting the needs of individuals related to leisure and movement of people (Kuqi, 2018). This source is poured into a base created by the

residents of Deçan, in order to be used for their needs, even though the conditions of this pool are not very good to be used properly. Although in these not good conditions, this place is visited by many not only the residents of Deçani, but also from the entire Dukagjin Plain and beyond (Municipality of Deçan, 2021). The lakes in the area of KP Nemuna Mountains are mainly glacial lakes which were created as a result of glacier activity (Lokaj, 2019). In terms of dimensions, the lakes are different, both in size, depth and stability. Some of these lakes during the summer, and especially during the dry summers, are exhausted (MESP, 2020). Many streams originate and flow from the mountains of Deçan. The waters of the mountains of Deçan are used for the good of the country, they are used for drinking, hydropower, agriculture, industry, etc.

Use of water for drinking and domestic purposes. Almost all the villages of Deçan and beyond get their drinking water from these mountains, the water is managed by KRU “Hidrodrini”, branch in Deçan. We also use the water to irrigate large agricultural areas, building dams to extract water from the rivers, to the extent that the Deçan River is the main supplier of the artificial Radonić Basin.

The use of water for hydropower. Now in Kosovo, according to KOSTT, there are 13 hydropower plants. There are 4 hydropower plants only in the Deçani Gorge along the river Lumbardhi: Lumbardhi 1 (8 MW) and Lumbardhi 2 (7 MW), HC Deçani (9.5 MW), HC Belleja (7.5 MW), (ZRRE, 2017).

- The small Lumbardhi hydropower plant was restored in 2005, with a lease of 20 + 20 years. Its capacity reaches 8.5 M.
- The small hydropower plant Lumbardhi II was installed in 2016, with a capacity of 6.2 MW.



Figure 6. The small hydropower plant Deçani

- The small Deçani hydropower plant is owned by the company “Kelkos Energy” sh.p.k. The capacities of this HCV have reached 9.8 MW. It is located in ZVM near the Monastery of Deçan (Figure 6).
- The small hydropower plant Belleja, owned by “Kelkos Energy” sh.p.k. Its HCV capacities have reached 8.06 MW. It is located in the National Park Area (IPS „Musine Kokalari”, 2021).

Use of water for irrigation – the water of the Deçan river is used for the irrigation of many agricultural areas, as well as the Lloqani river. The water of the Deçani dam was used to fill the Radonić basin, the water of which was used for drinking, for industry and for the irrigation of agricultural lands in the municipality of Gjakova and further up to the plains of Rahovec.

Water resources in Kosovo are also used for recreation and vacations. The water of Gushavci is used by citizens to cure many diseases. While the waters of the lakes are used for mountain tourism, these beauties are enjoyed by tourists.

Protecting park landscapes presents a challenge. The use of forests must be done with a plan and discretion. Until, the destruction of forests and uncontrolled developments lose the value and importance of landscapes, therefore they must be prevented. The landscape plays an important role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social plane and is also a source for economic activities, which enable the opening of new jobs. The park and the settlements around it are rich in cultural heritage values, especially houses, towers, archaeological sites and monasteries. The preservation, exploitation, promotion and further development of these values presents a special challenge for the future development of the park (MMPHI, 2022). Also a problem in

itself is the dispute and the compatibility of the mountains with the Monastery of Deçan, which is preventing investment in this country and creating better conditions for the use of this resource. So, even Deçan as a municipality has its own challenges and the same as other municipalities in the region, part of the Nemuna Mountains National Park. Problems arise for the preservation of forests (illegal cutting), the destruction of pastures - nature (wild construction), the destruction of riverbeds (construction of hydropower plants and uncontrolled exploitation of gravel), etc. Nemuna Mountainas, are in danger of irreversible destruction from brutal intervention with the aim of producing electricity from water, within the framework of increasing the level of renewable energy. Inhabitants of the city of Deçan have been alarmed by the very rapid growth of development projects that endanger rivers and mountains from environmental degradation (insertion of the river bed into pipes), and that have a direct effect on the lives of the population. (INDEP, 2019) (Figure 7).

The bed of the river Deçan has been partially treated in some places. The bed of the Lloqani River is partially fixed. Dams have been erected in Hulaj and Lloqan to prevent the erosion of the river bed and its banks (MESP, 2020). But, still in certain cases, the rivers and streams of our mountains come out of their beds, flooding agricultural lands and causing other damage.

The Lloqani River that passes through these localities causing flooding areas – fields east of Prejlepi, Rastavica, Devoll field of Baballoq village, Regjaj and Mushkolaj neighborhoods in Gramaçel village and Jasiq i Ri, from where it then flows into the villages of Gjakova Municipality.

Lumbardhi i Deçan – from bridge Demë, including the fields north of Deçan, Llukë and above and Ultë, Lumbardh, Kotradiq and Vranoc. Prroni



Figure 7. Mountain and Belgut

i Behovci – from the Hajrizaj neighborhood continues to Zalli Strellci, Isniq (Brükët) and village Dubovik. Prroni i Durak – the northern part of the village of Strellc i Epërm, the axis of the Strellc highway, Lubenic (QRM-REC, 2012). Necessarily, the underground water monitoring network should be established and regular monitoring of the groundwater condition should be done (MESP, 2021).

The mountains of Deçan are known for their amazing landscapes, rich biodiversity, and their economic, historical and cultural role in the life of local residents in this region and beyond. The mountains of Deçan and the surface waters that possess them represent a natural heritage and a precious resource for Kosovo. Through more sustainable care and the use of smarter ways of management and use it is possible to preserve and promote the integrity and value of this area in general and in particular for surface waters for the future of this region or municipality. High mountains, rich in water, pastures, trees can be used for tourism.

The waters of our mountains are important for the inhabitants and the country, they are used for hydropower (4 hydropower plants), for drinking and household water (water supply for about 40,000 inhabitants of Deçan and a large part of Gjakova), recreation – the beauties and the promenade of Lumbardhit of Deçan, irrigation of agricultural lands in the entire municipality of Deçan and a part of Gjakova.

The condition of the mountains today is not good, there are illegal constructions (sates), uncontrolled exploitation, the river beds are being damaged and they do not have enough and proper supervision, etc.

More concrete measures are needed to promote the protection and conservation of the forests of Deçan and to ensure that they remain a valuable resource for future generations.

CONCLUSIONS

Undoubtedly, the economic development of a country depends a lot on the natural resources that that country possesses, whether underground or above ground. The development policy of Deçan, but also of the country's institutions in Kosovo, should be oriented towards building the ecological infrastructure to preserve the environment in this very important area. The aim of this paper is to research the Bjeshke and Deçani Mountains,

with their amazing landscapes, rich plant biodiversity, their economic, historical and cultural role in the life of local residents in this region and beyond. The general assets of the Bjeshke and Deçan in general, especially the surface water (without neglecting the wooden, cultural-traditional assets) that these mountains possess, therefore, they present a valuable natural heritage and at the same time continue to be a valuable resource for economic development for Deçan and Kosovo. But this should be done even more through a more sustainable care and the use of smarter ways of management and use it is possible to preserve and promote the integrity and value of this area in general and in particular for surface waters for the future of this region or municipality. High mountains, rich in water, pastures, trees. These mountains have great potential and can be used throughout the year. For winter, summer and health tourism. In this mountain massif we have several tourist centers (newly formed) that can be used for tourism, as they are: Belleja, Bjeshka e Beleg (for skiing), Roshkodoli, etc. Also, the waters of our mountains are important for the inhabitants and the country, they are used for hydropower (4 hydropower plants), for drinking and household water (water supply for about 40,000 inhabitants of Deçan and a large part of Gjakova), recreation – beauty and the promenade of Lumbardhi in Deçan, irrigation of agricultural lands in the entire municipality of Deçan and a part of Gjakova. Wood, plant and other assets are valuable for the residents. However, the condition of the mountains in some cases is not good, there are illegal constructions (sates), uncontrolled exploitation, the river beds are being damaged and they do not have enough and proper supervision. So, more concrete measures are needed to promote the protection and preservation of the forests of Deçan and to ensure that they remain a valuable resource for future generations. Therefore, with this paper, we have contributed to the evaluation and promotion of the great natural and cultural assets that these mountains present to us and others. The drafting of a long-term strategy and the rational use of economic resources would create all the opportunities for maximum use of favorable climatic conditions, which would increase the overall development of the economy of Deçan, but also the development of Kosovo. In general, it can be concluded that the mountain complex Nemuna Mountains has favorable conditions of the mountain climate, which would be a valuable

factor in the development of mountain tourism, which means the development of the Deçana economy. In order to preserve the natural assets and cultural heritage of Deçan, it is necessary to apply different policies and measures.

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