

Balkan Youth Environment Assembly

We are an ecosystem that can thrive together!

February 23-25th - 16:00 - 18:00 CET

Who We Are & What We Stand For

The Balkan Youth Environment Assembly (BYEA) is a civil-society initiative organized by and for young people in the Balkans to learn and dialogue about the environmental issues that matter most to them. The regional youth assembly is supported by the UNEP Major Group for Children and Youth (UNEP MGCY) and was organized in the lead-up to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA 5.2).

As young people in the Balkans we see the biological diversity of existing ecosystems and the way they have and continue to inform traditional ecological knowledge and cultural heritage.

We are all vested in the collective well-being of human and non-human life in this region.

There is no time to waste - climate action is needed in the Balkans now.

Noting the decision of the Human Rights Council to recognise the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, we see life in harmony with nature as a benefit to our health, our economies and our overall well-being.

Emphasizing the interconnected nature of climate change, loss of biodiversity, land degradation, and air and water pollution, it is essential to cooperate within the region on implementing multilateral environmental agreements and environmental processes for our shared benefit.

We call on Governments, the private sector, non-governmental public health and environmental organizations, trade unions, academic institutions, and other civil society organizations to put environmental science concerning food, animal, human health and wellbeing at the forefront of decision making.

Recognizing that resources are needed to make the transition to nature-positive rural and urban futures, we note that the prevention of environmental degradation is cheaper than remediation or the loss of ecosystem services, health, and tourism.

We affirm our commitment to our shared ecosystems and encourage the creation of high-skilled jobs that serve the environment and society.

Our recommendations follow on the themes of:

- Climate crisis & natural disasters
- Natural heritage, biodiversity, & traditional ecological knowledge
- Environmental governance and pollution management
- Green energy & tech

The Action We Want

Climate crisis & natural disasters

Climate projection models predict that rise in temperatures, erratic patterns of precipitation, events of frequent droughts and flooding are likely to increase in coming years. The consequences of flooding include damage to property, destruction of crops, and loss of livestock - with severe economic impacts for communities. Increasing floods and droughts in the Western Balkans, will pose greater risks to the economy, flora, fauna, and human health. There is a need for countries within shared river basins in the Balkans to take joint action in terms of preparedness, response and recovery, to successfully adapt to predicted changes.

Increasingly frequent and intense extreme events during the last two decades have already caused great damage in the Balkans. In 2014, historic flooding caused over €2 billion in damages and losses in Bosnia and Herzegovina and over €1.5 billion in damages and losses in Serbia. Last summer we witnessed record temperatures that buckled train tracks, fueled dozens of fires across the Balkans, forced Albania to spend €200 million on energy imports, and caused a drought in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Serbia. The region's vulnerability to these climate shocks confirms the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's [latest report](#) showing the impact of climate change on our food and water security, agricultural productivity, and physical and mental health. These kinds of risks will increase over the next two decades – but measures taken now can help us adapt to the impacts. The report's findings reinforce the need to strengthen implementation of the [EU Adaptation Strategy](#) in order for the Balkans region to become more climate resilient and to prepare for the inevitable impacts of the climate crisis.

Nature based solutions can provide cost-effective ecosystem and community resilience while providing for human well-being and biodiversity benefits. Their use in response to societal challenges remains unexplored in the Western Balkans compared to conventional gray infrastructure. For instance, the soil is alive with microbes, roots, and mycorrhizal fungi that provide natural nitrogen-fixing, carbon sequestration, and water retention ecosystem services.

Coal-fired power plants in the Western Balkans are releasing sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and dust that are contributing to significant air pollution levels and causing tens of thousands deaths in addition to health care costs over a short period of years. The urgency to mitigate the catastrophic impacts of climate change necessitates a rapid transition from fossil fuel-based energy systems to clean, low, to no-carbon energy systems.

As weather patterns become more uncertain in the region, governments within the Balkans will need to take increasingly proactive approaches to ensure safety and prosperity of communities. Strong international partnerships – and forward-looking investments in resilience are needed. Serbia became one of the first countries in the world to fully align its legislation with the [Sendai Framework](#) with the Balkan region's first comprehensive disaster risk management framework. By working across borders, all Balkan countries can provide better early warnings for disaster and climate risks to all of their citizens.

Recommendations

- Developing climate action plans such as phasing out coal and re-directing public funds in investment towards a carbon neutral economy such as: energy efficiency measures, renewable energy, nature based solutions in support of [EU's 2030 greenhouse gas emission targets](#), [Zero Pollution Action Plan](#) and the [EU's Renovation Wave Strategy](#).
- Investment in the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples and local communities in the Balkans through nature-based solutions to climate change e.g. green infrastructure for flood management.
- Developing joint preparedness, adaptation and mitigation plans for marginalized and vulnerable communities in the region aligning the legislative policies with the [Sendai Framework](#).
- All relevant stakeholders should lead, invest, and promote climate innovative interventions in local communities to provide a range of environmental benefits and create employment opportunities inclusive for the marginalized and most vulnerable communities addressing existing inequities in the rural Balkans.
- Governments of member states in the Balkans should develop an annual report detailing the status of all general policies and projects to track and monitor their progress on implementation of their climate action plans. This would include joint preparedness, response, and recovery coordination to floods and droughts.
- Development of an integrated response strategies to climate adaptation under [EU's Adaptation Strategy](#), disaster risk reduction and ecosystem-based adaptation, while also ensuring that these policies are non-discriminatory and inclusive.
- Implement a Green Deal for the Balkans region by promoting actions to deliver key [European Green Deal's](#) objectives under the [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) and the [EU Circular Economy Action Plan](#).

Natural heritage, biodiversity, & traditional ecological knowledge

Human health and well-being depend on ecosystems for services and benefits such as food and freshwater. Biodiversity underpins the ecological functions and processes that give rise to the benefits provided by ecosystems, including the purification of water and air, pest and disease control, pollination, soil fertility, and resilience to climate change. The interactions between people and biodiversity can strongly influence population health, livelihoods, and the sustainability of public health interventions. Systems thinking including [One Health](#) and One Welfare models help us to understand how wildlife displacement can lead to disease in humans.

The region's natural assets need to be sustained and can generate new business opportunities and rural development through access to new markets, processing agricultural yields into secondary products, and environmental tourism. Illegal trafficking of endangered plants and animals is a threat to biodiversity and is a theft of natural heritage.

With urbanization, traditional ecological knowledge and rural culture is being lost. At the same time, young people in Western Balkans are migrating due to unequal opportunities for education and careers. The rural – urban gap in incomes, job opportunities and prospects for young people need to be addressed with policies and specific measures targeted at young people.

Recommendations

- Environmental monitoring and enforcement of environmental laws especially concerning protected areas, species, and habitats is needed.
 - Accept and enforce [CITES - \(the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora\)](#)
 - Consider expanding the [European Green Belt Initiative](#)
- Invest in innovative smart rural development and digitization with ICT technologies in a way that aligns with traditional ecological knowledge. This includes jobs in precision agriculture, green technologies, and financial stimulus for the creation of green jobs in rural Balkans.
- Recognize the connection between culture and the environment, and include the teaching of traditional ecological knowledge in schools addressing existing disconnect between urban and rural areas.
- Provide training in sustainable practices to farmers and others engaged in food production so as to avoid soil and water degradation to ensure food & water security.
- Ensure the protection and restoration of 30% of land and ocean, in alignment with the 30x30 Conservation Agenda.
- Recognition of Eco-sensitive zones (ESZ) and Ecologically Fragile Areas (EFA) considered Environmental Protected Areas (EPA) in the region.
- Identify and hold accountable for ecocide business operations that systematically destroy, disrupt, and pollute ecosystems.

Environmental governance and pollution management

There is inadequate implementation and enforcement of existing environmental laws and regulations as well as insufficient engagement and dialogue inclusive of local communities towards environmental protection. Rights to participate in environmental decision-making are curtailed with shortened comment periods on proposals affecting the environment, as well as insufficient access and dissemination of environmental information that is held by public authorities.

Designing out waste should be a priority as the waste management systems remain non-existent. There are no policy instruments to encourage extended producer responsibility of plastic waste. A plastics treaty should incorporate key principles including precaution, prevention, polluter pays, intergenerational equity and non-discrimination. Consideration is needed for people living in extreme poverty and waste-pickers, who are disproportionately impacted from exposures to chemicals in plastic and plastic waste.

Recommendations

- Mainstreaming environmental education
 - Commit to expanding education curricula from the earliest age through the whole education process in an interdisciplinary way regarding the causes, effects and solutions of climate crisis, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and environmental governance. Ensure linkages are made to impacts on livelihoods, food safety, and health inclusive of traditional ecological knowledge.
 - Develop a green workforce in urban and rural areas through capacity building programs for young people focussed on environmental science and technology.
- Life-centered governance processes
 - Policies supported through best-available science on environmental quality, biodiversity, and the state of one health through strong science-policy interface.
 - Development of mechanisms for facilitation for segregation of medical waste and other industrial waste to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, specifically for workers in waste segregation in the Balkans.
- Implementation of environmental treaties, laws, regulations
 - Implementation of the Aarhus Convention and enable the right to participate in decision-making e.g. comment on developments with an environmental impact as well as the right to access justice and challenge public decisions that violate environmental laws with a focus on the inclusion of young people and the most vulnerable in the rural Balkans.
- Develop waste management and circular economy policies in line with EU best practices. Focus on the prevention of plastic pollution under the [Waste Framework Directive](#) and [Zero Pollution Action Plan](#).
 - Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) increases participation and engagement for major producers, industries, brands, and distributors to develop and adopt sound management of chemicals and plastic waste throughout its life-cycle, and to develop strategies to transition to safe packaging materials eg bio-based and marine-friendly certified materials.
 - Extended Regulator Responsibility (ERR) facilitates plastic management compliance through monitoring mechanisms, can include bans on non-biodegradables for packaging industries, as well as incentives to develop a circular economy.
 - Extended Consumer Responsibility (ECR) promotes best practices for individuals and communities for a low to zero waste lifestyle. Encourages societies to take care of the waste within their immediate surroundings through recycling activities and transporting waste to local waste banks as well as using renewable products.
 - Governments can provide policy guidelines and frameworks for systematic and effective waste management, prohibit landfills, ban illegal burning and discharge of untreated waste.

- Developing binding legislation for industries that operate in their respective country in the Balkans so both local and foreign companies are held accountable for water and soil pollution.
- Partnerships across all levels and sectors for the benefit of nature and healthy ecosystems
 - Develop a regional academic network to advance scientific, technical and technological cooperation on ecological monitoring in order to strengthen the governance of shared water, land, and environmental services.
 - Ministries of the environment alongside civil society partners and academic institutions should identify mechanisms to monitor industrial/large-scale waste among local communities in the Balkans and test water quality routinely to ensure citizens are not exposed to toxic waste and other harmful pollutants.
 - Engaging in an EPR-ERR-ECR framework on shared responsibility towards sustainable partnerships and engagements for a healthy ecosystem and the creation of sustainable jobs that build towards the SDGs.

Green Energy & Tech

Green/renewable energy is the energy we all must focus on developing now for the future. It is the energy that does the least damage to nature and our health. The importance of renewable energy such as wind, solar, biomass and geothermal remains unexplored and under-developed in Balkan Countries.

Capacity-building for civic society organizations, in the development and expansion of grassroots projects could be achieved by connecting regional projects and good practices with a focus on educating the public on the damage caused by coal, fossil-fuel and non-renewable resource exploitation for energy to the environment and our health.

The Balkans can play an important role in maximizing the impact of the European Green Deal. This region has a large, developed renewable energy capacity, with a significantly developed hydro-energy capacity. Leaving the Western Balkans outside the European Green Deal could lead to electricity price disparity with EU countries.

Recommendations

- Development of a platform through regional academic institutions/experts network for knowledge on green and just transition for civil-society to educate themselves and their families and friends.
- Support youth to participate and engage in advocating for green energy.
- Invest in expanding the potential and development of renewable energy in the region such as wind, geo-thermal, biomass, and solar in addition to hydro-energy.
- We call for green energy systems, such as hydropower, to apply greater financial transparency, public consultation mechanisms, as well as research and monitoring into their environmental impact before initiating projects.