

Case study: Slovakia - Areas protected by the municipality.

Subtitle: We care about the place where we live in.

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„Areas protected by the municipality” is the concept which is based on grassroot local nature protection. The case study is from middle Slovakia – village called Pliešovce and its part named Zaježová. It is located in Javorie Mountains. The area is not protected by any legally binding legislation despite there are localities with high ecological value.

For centuries the inhabitants of this mountain valley managed little sustainable farms spread in small valley. In the second half of the 20th century young people began leaving the area with a dream of an „easier life” in towns. At the beginning of the nineties mostly the elderly remained. From the original 600 inhabitants, the number decreased to 190 in the year 2000. Zaježová became part of neighbouring bigger village Pliešovce (2200 inhabitants).

On the contrary, the area became attractive for environmentalist and people interested in traditional culture from whole country. Some of them moved into the village with vision of creating community based on sustainable lifestyle and respect to local traditions. Currently there are 85 new-comers (including 35 children) living in the area spread between original inhabitants. The activists have reconstructed the old farm and established there an environmental educational centre. The centre is now used by many organizations in Slovakia including authorities, schools and businesses. Reconstruction was funded by various sources, Norwegian funds and GEF SGP among others.

The interesting fact about Pliešovce-Zaježová is that almost all forest land (2100 ha) and many hectares of pastures are owned by municipality. Municipality has created a company to maintain its forest land. Big part of public meadows is not used for decades, so it is slowly changing to forest.

Recently many citizens of village became concerned about overexploitation of local resources. They have started an initiative for „areas protected by municipality”. The basic idea is very simple – forest belongs to village, what means all citizens should have influence how it is managed - not only the company which is managing it currently. It should not be used only for short-term economical benefits, but also for maintaining ecological stability of the area (especially to keep local water resources stable) and also for recreational and educational purposes. There should be identified areas which have high ecological value and these should not be destroyed by economical activities. The rest of municipality’s forests and meadows should be managed by sustainable way.

Volunteers educated in ecology, together with local people have identified 120 hectares of land which fulfilled demanded criteria. The criteria were not only ecological, also localities with high esthetic value were included. They were divided to four sections - forests, meadows, trees, attractive localities (rocks, water resources etc.). Representatives of the initiative have started negotiations with municipality and forest management company. As they were facing kind of initial resistance to this idea especially from foresters they have started a petition between all citizens of Pliešovce and Zaježová. They succeeded to gather 500+ signatures within first 3 days which persuaded the municipality, that the idea has strong support between local inhabitants. Since then even foresters started to cooperate and now they are defining precise borders of all areas. The process is ongoing and open to new proposals from local people. The idea of “Areas protected by municipality” is being to be incorporated into regional development plan and into municipality’s legislation. Future plans for forest management should be consulted with representatives of the initiative.

The difference as compared to classic ways of establishment of protected areas is that general public is usually excluded from standard process of governmental nature protection. Therefore protected areas are often perceived as something negative and hampering by local people. Protected areas in Zaježová were proposed by local people, including children, what makes a big difference.

Another negative aspect of establishing the protected areas in top-down approach is selection of the most valuable areas in comparison to the national or international conditions. It is good from the point of view of preserving the most fragile natural treasures. However, in conditions of changed environment, some places are “valuable” in local conditions, ie. an 100 years old tree in the middle of agricultural land.

As there are many regions in Slovakia where the land is owned by municipalities, the initiative wants to spread “know-how” also to activists in other villages in country starting with closest neighbors. They are persuaded that this bottom-up approach will help to raise real interest in nature protection within rural population of Slovakia.